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# In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

November 17, 2003

## Dawn of a New Media?



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## Editorial

# Creating Better Choices

We each inhabit our own individualized media landscape: We choose what we read, what we see and what we hear. But these choices are determined by what is available.

Media corporations hold a near monopoly on the information that the vast majority of us rely on to make sense of the world. This dominant media sets the boundaries of permissible thought, defines our mental horizons, and is the bellwether (literally, the lead sheep in a herd) of our time.

The corporate media provide choice, but within limits that the marketplace sets. Yet the marketplace, while immensely powerful, does not rule absolutely.

We devote this special media issue, not to diagnosing the blight that is the mainstream media—been there, done that—but, rather, to examining the promise offered by progressive media. Progressives have a lot of ideas about what a media strategy should be, but little collective agreement. That is our central challenge. It is hard to see how we can take on the dominant media without an ongoing dialogue and collaborative efforts that harness our desire to create a media landscape that nurtures mental and civic life.

To that end, the writers in this issue explore how we can build media that put people before profits.

### What is the progressive media strategy?

Susan J. Douglas, our "Back Talk" columnist, calls on progressives to rediscover "our own agenda-setting roots from the '60s, study which revisions of them by the right have worked, and then forge ahead."

### What do we need?

Studs Terkel eviscerates "brass check" journalism ("What's that?" you wonder) and he cautions us to be aware of "the national Alzheimer's disease" that "keeps people from doing what they know they should do for their own good." Studs tells us that "the key is not simply to dissent, but to turn the country around. ... Now is the time to act, and, thus, become what we were born to be—thinking, active citizens of a democratic society."

Media critic Norman Solomon takes left-leaning foundations to task for being "hesi-

tant and unwilling to fund media work" unlike the right-wing foundations that "sink millions of dollars a week into aggressive media-savvy propaganda outfits like the Heritage Foundation."

### What can we learn?

David Kusnet, Bill Clinton's chief speechwriter from 1992 through 1994, argues that progressives must learn a new language. "Speaking everyday language, appealing to common values and developing populist parables—that's how progressives can communicate to our fellow citizens, not just each other."

### What's next?

Patricia Aufderheide, an *In These Times* senior editor, looks to the future and the "astounding implications of digital technology and the Internet." Because so many media consumers are turning to filtering to escape "data smog," she calls on progressives to do some hard thinking about how their media can become a filter and a choice. Progressives, she writes, also need "to find allies in reform to demand resources and policies that support public media spaces."

## Progressives have ideas about what a media strategy should be, but little collective agreement.

Those spaces aren't left-owned or even left-leaning, but because they are public zones, progressives have a voice in them that they don't have in commercial media."

And, mindful that our media landscape must always include art, humor and a love of life, we conclude with some words from Kurt Vonnegut, who introduces us to Gil Berman, a character from his next novel, *If God Were Alive Today*.

In the wake of the war in Iraq, Americans are beginning to realize that they have been lied to by their political leaders and an acquiescent mainstream media that routinely parrot the Bush administration. People are hungry for integrity, decency and common sense—all things that a vibrant, progressive media can provide.

—Joel Bleifuss

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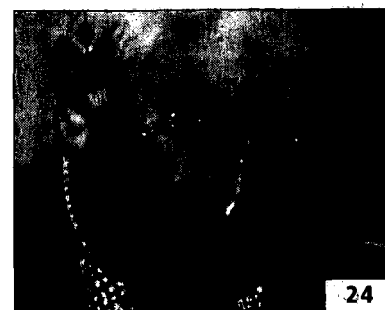
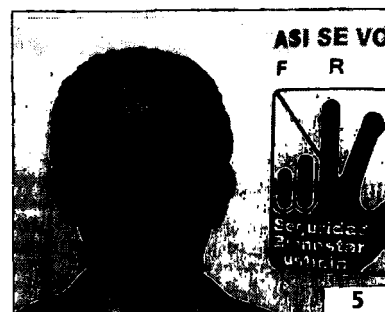
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## Yes, They're Nuts

I appreciated Joel Bleifuss' report ("Conservatives Deconstructed," October 13) on an extensive review of 88 psychological studies conducted over the preceding 44 years on the motivations of political conservatives. Social science research of this kind that looks at the deeper emotional sources of people's political attitudes can potentially help those capable of more cognitive complexity to develop more effective strategies for pursuing their agendas for peace, justice and ecological protection.

One question is not addressed by the article, however. How do conservatives develop this personality profile? Their personalities are characterized by tendencies to be dogmatic, intolerant of ambiguity, cognitively simplistic, avoidant of novelty, pessimistic, fearful of the world and of death, prejudiced, punitive, and lacking in compassion for the disadvantaged. For an answer to this question, I highly recommend *The Politics of Denial*, by Michael A. Milburn and Sheree D. Conrad (The MIT Press, 1996). These authors provide substantial empirical evidence, based on a review of the literature and their own research, that the punitive, xenophobic political attitudes of conservatives derive from backgrounds of having been raised punitively, including having received severe corporal punishment as children. Human character is significantly shaped in our earliest years and those concerned with positive social transformation need to take this more into account.

Mitch Hall

Author, *Peace Quest: Cultivating Peace in a Violent Culture* (2003)  
Sausalito, California

I enjoyed Joel Bleifuss' article. For some time now I have had this belief that conservatism is to humans what herding is to animals, flocking is to birds and schooling is to fish. The group protects the individuals and the individuals protect the group. Humans become very threatened when their primeval herding instincts are challenged. So maybe conservatives are not nuts but are only practicing normal biological behavior of survival. Humans, like other creatures, feel protected as part of a large group.

Liberals question the herd because sometimes it appears they are charging toward a cliff. But the leaders don't like to be challenged. So very often the human herd falls off the cliff. I don't think liberals have a herd-

ing instinct. Maybe they are not normal and this is why there are not so many of them. Perhaps liberals are really conservative, but like to think for themselves.

Carl Archambeau  
Grand Ledge, Michigan

I grew up in a conservative family and have watched America's rightward career with growing alarm ever since California led the way (as usual) with Proposition 13 and Ronald Ray-gun (zap). These studies confirm

impressions and hypotheses I've been trying to articulate for years. Conservatives are, in essence, bullies—and like all bullies, they're acting aggressively to compensate for the miserable little coward hidden inside. The question is whether this tendency, which seems innate in a large percentage of human beings, will result in killing us all. But as a liberal, I just keep falling back on some (equally innate?) sense of hope.

Drew Trott  
Pacifica, California

## A Note from Ana Marie Cox

You may have noticed a subtle change in my column's title (p. 11)—I am no longer "Power Mad," but rather concerned with "Power Pop." This change should alert you to the slightly different direction the column is taking: Basically, my esteemed colleagues will shoulder the burden of talking about progressive issues and policy, while I foray bravely into the outer reaches of popular culture to bring back to you, dear readers, news of the political subtexts I find there. It should be an adventure for all concerned.

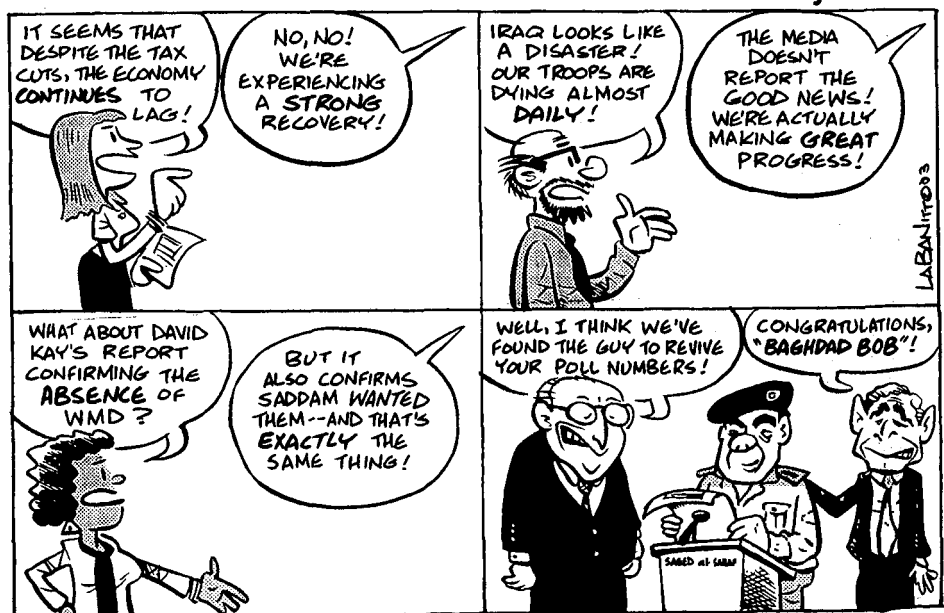
## Chicago-area In These Times and Nation readers

We want to talk to you!

If you are an *In These Times* subscriber who also subscribes to *The Nation*, we'd like to invite you to participate in a focus group. Why do you read *The Nation*? Why do you read *In These Times*? What do you value most about each magazine?

If you live in the Chicago area and would be willing to meet during the month of November or December, please contact Associate Publisher Tracy Van Slyke at 773-772-0100 ext. 243 or email her at [tracy@inthesetimes.com](mailto:tracy@inthesetimes.com) by Friday, November 7.

Terry LaBan



## White-Collar Blues

Professional jobs shifting overseas

By Dave Lindorff

The loss of more than 2 million jobs so far in the Bush administration has been a particular source of anger among Democrats. This was highlighted in early October with an announcement by air-conditioner maker Carrier that it was moving 1,200 jobs from Syracuse overseas—a major blow to that upstate New York city.

Continued job losses during what is supposed to be a slow recovery are leading to calls for new laws to protect American manufacturing. In fact, there is a much graver threat to American workers.

Economists studying workforce issues say as many as a third of the jobs lost since 2000 were white-collar, ranging from customer service representatives and computer programmers to accountants, engineers and lawyers.

Indeed, the big story in coming years may be how corporations are “offshoring” the very jobs pro-globalization politicians and academics have long said are the American laborer’s salvation.

“People always had this class bias,” says Marcus Courtney, president of the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers in Seattle, a unit of the Communications Workers of America that is attempting to organize workers at Microsoft and other technology companies. “They’d say, ‘Geez, of course blue-collar jobs will go overseas. Those workers are just caught in the past. If they’d just go back to school they’d be fine.’ But what do you say now to the X-ray technician, the accountant or the engineer with a master’s degree when their jobs go overseas?”

According to Forrester Research, a Boston-based consulting company that tracks business trends, between 2000 and 2015 the United States could lose as many as 3.3 million jobs overseas, a good number of them high-paying and white-collar. And that’s a low-end estimate. Others see losses double that amount.

IBM recently told employees it was planning to shift thousands of white-col-

lar jobs to other countries. That should come as no surprise: besides contracting out many of its own back-office operations overseas, IBM is a leading provider of corporate outsourcing services. The company recently announced it was taking over most back-office operations of Procter & Gamble’s, with much of that work going overseas to an IBM outsourcing subsidiary. IBM’s outsourcing operation also handles much of the finance department operations for BP, one of the world’s largest oil companies.

Corporate managers are loath to attribute the loss of white-collar jobs to simple cost saving—preferring to say they are “strategically refocusing” on their “core competencies”—but cost-cutting is driving this trend. Countries like India, South Africa, China and the Czech Republic have countless well-educated computer experts, accountants, mathematicians and economists, fluent in English and ready to work for a fraction of what their U.S. counterparts would demand.

Offshore outsourcing of white-collar jobs also is easier than moving factories overseas. Producing goods overseas for sale in the United States always has been a risky endeavor. There are shipping risks (a pre-Christmas dock strike, for example, could erase a year’s profits), exchange rate unpredictability, country risks and, of course, labor problems at home.

White-collar job shifts don’t pose these problems. With no products involved, there are no tariff issues. And should one outsourcing country develop political troubles, the contract could be shifted to another provider in a different country. Meanwhile, with few U.S. white-collar workers unionized, resistance is minimal.

Indeed, one particularly ugly aspect to this new phenomenon is that U.S. companies fly in foreign workers, have their American workers train them, and then send them back to their overseas homes

with the American trainer’s job. “People put up with this without complaint because they’re afraid if they complain it may hurt their severance payment or job recommendation,” said the CWA’s Courtney.

“Attitudes are changing,” Courtney says, noting that his local’s subscriber list has grown from 2,000 to 16,000 in the



past six months. “But there’s a long way to go,” he says.

Meanwhile, strategies aimed at saving manufacturing jobs, such as tax credits, retraining funds, federal contract “buy American” requirements and the like, will do little to stem white-collar job flight.

“Congress and elected officials just have failed to grasp that this is a threat to America’s middle class,” Courtney said. “This is not about free trade; it’s about job exportation.” ■

Dave Lindorff is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.





Wellstone World Music Day pays tribute to the senator, who died last year in a plane crash.

## Carry It Forward

Wellstone's legacy lives on

By Jeremy O'Kasick

Progressives across the nation will come together October 25 for Wellstone World Music Day, to mark the one-year anniversary of Paul Wellstone's death.

The former senator from Minnesota, his wife, Sheila, their daughter Marcia Wellstone Markuson, three campaign workers and two pilots died in a plane crash while campaigning in northern Minnesota 11 days before the 2002 Senate election.

Wellstone World Music Day began when Jim Walsh, a veteran music critic in the Twin Cities, called for a musical tribute in an e-mail essay sent to family members and friends in August.

"On that day, every piece of music, from orchestras to shower singers, superstars to buskers, will be an expression of that loss and celebration of that life," Walsh wrote.

The essay received such strong and widespread response that a Web site—[www.wellstoneworldmusicday.org](http://www.wellstoneworldmusicday.org)—was established for groups and venues to post events.

Some of Wellstone World Music Day will be captured in *Carry It Forward!*, a documentary exploring the Wellstones' lives.

Lu Lippold, a co-director with Laurie Stern and Dan Luke of Hard Working Pictures, said the documentary sprang from a request by Wellstone staffers to take footage of events following the crash.

Besides a biographical look at Paul and Sheila Wellstone, the documentary will follow how their political vision is being carried on in progressive circles. Lippold anticipates that *Carry It Forward!* will be released by June 2004, although some Wellstone World Music Day groups will screen a 10-minute trailer of the film.

"After the crash, everybody was a wreck, wondering what to do," says Lippold. "Well, we make documentaries, so that's what we did."

More information about the film can be found at [www.carryitforward.org](http://www.carryitforward.org). ■

Jeremy O'Kasick is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer.

## THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW

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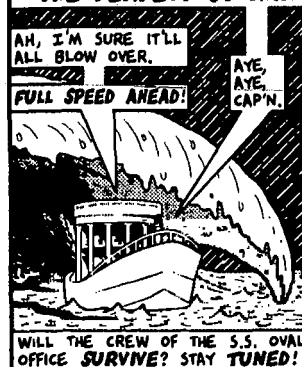
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WILL THE CREW OF THE S.S. OVAL OFFICE SURVIVE? STAY TUNED!

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# Killer Candidate

Ex-general threatens  
Guatemalan election

By Victor Blue

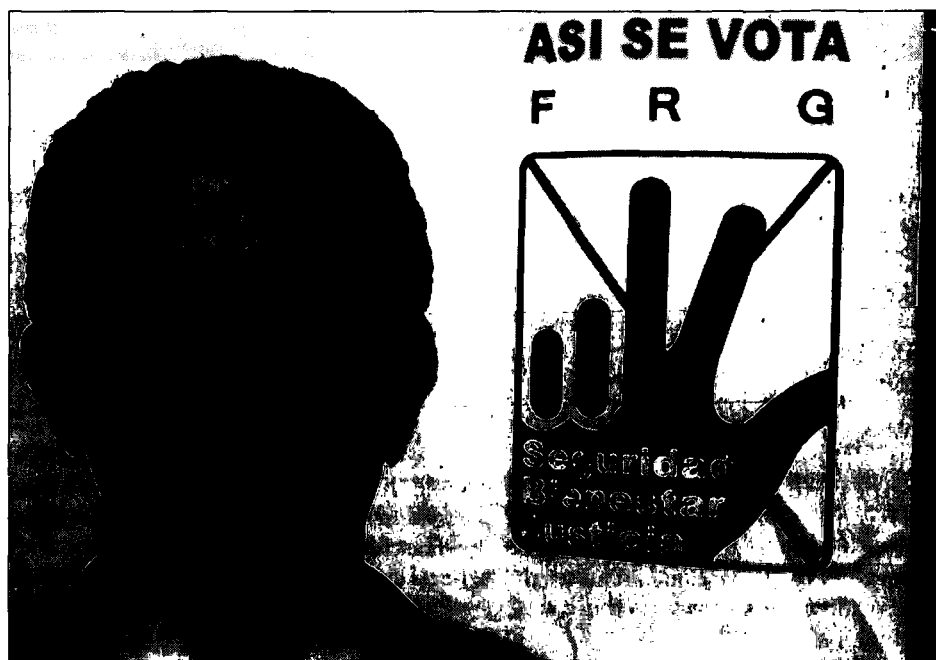
The second peacetime elections in Guatemala since the 1996 Peace Accords could return one of the country's most brutal dictators to power.

Efraín Ríos Montt—who seized power in 1982 and whose scorched-earth policy of the following 18 months resulted in more than 19,000 deaths—became an official candidate in late July. He is a former general in the Guatemalan army, the former head of the Guatemalan evangelical church, and current president of the National Congress.

The Guatemalan constitution prohibits anyone who has taken power by force from running for president. For months, Ríos Montt and supporters in his Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (Guatemalan Republican Front or FRG) appealed to the country's confusing and overlapping jurisdictional court system to allow his candidacy, arguing that the constitutional clause is not retroactive and therefore does not apply to coup leaders who took power before it was enacted. Each appeal was turned down until it reached the Constitutional Court, the country's highest. As head of the legislative branch and de facto leader of the executive, Ríos Montt influenced judicial appointments. Four of the seven judges are his supporters.

On July 24, just before his appearance before the Constitutional Court, Ríos Montt called for a demonstration in support of his candidacy. About 5,000 masked rioters armed with machetes and clubs descended on the capital, where they shut down the U.S. Embassy, harassed workers at several human rights organizations and held a portion of the city hostage. A Guatemalan journalist died of a heart attack while being chased through the streets, and a Reuters photographer was beaten along the same route. Neither the national police nor the army helped quell the violence, despite claims by President Alfonso Portillo that he ordered both.

Ríos Montt called off the demonstrations the next day and a week later the



Campaign propaganda for Ríos Montt.

Constitutional Court allowed his candidacy. Subsequently, the Guatemalan press has reported that government resources were used in the demonstrations, and numerous FRG functionaries and members of Congress were implicated in helping to organize the demonstrations, including Montt's niece, an FRG deputy in Congress.

Karen Ohm Heskja, a human rights worker in Guatemala, called the demonstrations a coup. "He brought in his own army and intimidated everyone into giving him what he wanted," she said.

The violence and uncertainty that has characterized Guatemalan life for years has worsened during the campaign: 21 candidates or political functionaries have disappeared since the race began in December; not a single one is affiliated with the FRG.

Twelve candidates remain. According to recent polls, right-wing pro-business candidate Oscar Berger has a 44 percent lead, but these polls don't take into account rural communities that form Ríos Montt's base of support. Alvaro Colom of the left-leaning UNE party is running second. URNG candidate Rodrigo Asturias, former guerilla commander and son of Nobel prize-winning author Miguel Ángel Asturias, is polling behind Ríos Montt.

International reaction to Ríos Montt's candidacy has been consistently negative.

The U.S. State Department said it would be difficult for the United States to maintain normal relations with Guatemala if Ríos Montt were to gain power, and the European Union, the Organization of American States and the United Nations all have called for observers to ensure a fair election.

A congressional delegation led by U.S. Rep. Cass Ballenger (R-N.C.) recently visited the capital and threatened to exclude Guatemala from the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement if Ríos Montt assumes power by fraudulent means. Fraud is a chief concern because frequent press reports indicate that Ríos Montt and the FRG have repeatedly violated the electoral pact signed by all the parties at the beginning of the race that pledged no use of intimidation, violence or state resources.

Most Guatemalans are watching and waiting. Many believe that Ríos Montt and the FRG will do whatever it takes to win the election. As for the return of "the General," as his campaign calls him, a child of ex-guerrillas who grew up in exile had this to say: "It was because of him that we were in Mexico before. If he wants war again, we will give him war." ■

Victor Blue is a freelance photographer based in San Francisco.

## Making it Official

### Same-sex couples win registry rights in Cook County

By Christopher Hayes

After nearly a decade of advocating for official recognition of gay couples, Chicagoans John Pennycuff and Robert Castillo wanted to be sure they were the first to sign up for Cook County's new domestic partner registry October 1.

"The only the way to do that was to get there at midnight," Pennycuff says. "So we watched the Cubs game and after the Cubs won we went down to the county building."

The next morning, before dozens of onlookers, they became the first of 71 couples to be officially partnered. Within days that number had grown beyond 100.

Cook County, the nation's second-largest, became the 64th government body (cities, counties and states) to offer official recognition of same-sex couples. The registry confers no benefits or legal rights, but County Clerk David Orr nevertheless says it's a significant step.

"The idea of convincing people of a domestic partnership registry 10 years ago was no less difficult than convincing people how crazy the war on Iraq is now," he said. "It's a good example of how if you organize you can change attitudes."

Castillo and Pennycuff—who have been together for 12 years, are active in Chicago's LGBT community and sit on the city's LGBT advisory board—raised

the issue of a domestic partner registry in a 1994 letter to Orr. He supported the idea but told them it would have to be passed by the county board, which had little inclination to enact such a measure. Over time, the election of progressives to the county board changed the political landscape, making such a registry possible.

County Board Commissioner Mike Quigley, who sponsored the domestic registry and a previous bill granting benefits to same-sex partners of county employees, is encouraged that the ordinance (which passed this summer on a 13-3 vote) met with less resistance than the legislation he sponsored four years ago.

"I think familiarity breeds acceptance and understanding," he says. "And as more and more people became familiar they became less resistant to change."

Conservative groups are banking on

### Glitcher Guns **4.8**

During a budget crisis you might expect government officials to allude to the need for everybody to tighten their belts. But, according to the *Birmingham News*, Alabama's top lawmaker is telling people to pack more heat. Attorney General Bill Pryor told Alabamians recently that due to the severe budget crisis, the state may not be able to protect them from criminals. "Alabama citizens will be more unsafe as a result of this budget than they were before," Pryor said ominously. "My advice would be for people to do what they can lawfully to protect their homes and families. Some people will buy security systems. Other people will engage in other behavior." Voters recently rejected a proposal by Gov. Bob Riley to raise taxes, and as a result, the state has proposed a number of cost-cutting measures, including the release of as many as 6,000 inmates and a reduction in the state's police force.

### The Pause that Refreshes **4.4**

Finally, an antidote has been found to the fatigue and torpor often experienced by today's pimp. The hip-hop star Nelly has introduced his own brand of high-energy drink, endearingly named Pimp Juice. This bright green philter takes its place in a market crowded with other brands, so Nelly resourcefully recorded a chart-climbing single, also titled "Pimp Juice," to realize synergies. In the words of the rapper, "Pimp Juice is anything, attract the opposite sex, it could be money, fame, or straight intellect, it don't matter!"

### Sensitive, New Age Intruder **1.2**

After weeks of detective work, police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana have finally caught a serial cuddler. Steve Danos, 24, has been booked on numerous felony counts. Described by victims as "harmless" and "skinny," Danos had been prowling around apart-

ment buildings near Louisiana State University looking for open doors and windows. Once inside a woman's apartment, the man would watch his victim sleep. He would often fold her clothes or arrange her shoes, according to WBRZ News2 in Baton Rouge. Occasionally, he would snuggle with the victim.

### Halftime for Hitler **1.3**

In retrospect, high school band director Charles Grissom allows that it was a mistake to lead his charges in a rendition of "Deutschland Uber Alles" during halftime of a football game and to have a kid run across the field carrying a Nazi flag. But he says in his own defense that it was part of his visionary halftime extravaganza, "Visions of World

War II." Still, the show at Hillcrest High School in Dallas touched off a demmybrook, reports The Associated Press, as the crowd booed and threw things at the band. Angry fans assailed the team's coaches.

Grissom's Paris High School was the visiting team that evening.

Grissom, deeply apologetic, explained that the show was a "historical, accurate depiction of the event," and that it had gone over like gangbusters the week before at Paris' homecoming game against nearby Athens High.





Quigley being wrong. The Associated Press recently reported that such groups as the Christian Coalition and the Southern Baptist Convention are looking to capitalize on sentiment against gay marriage by making the issue a rallying cry in the upcoming election. Around the same time, the White House christened October 12-18 "Marriage Protection Week," saying that the weeklong observance "provides an opportunity to focus our efforts on preserving the sanctity of marriage," defining marriage as "a union between a man and a woman."

Castillo sees the president's proclamation as a sign of the political strength of the LGBT community: "I think they're afraid because they see that there's a movement happening, so they're digging in their heels." ■

Christopher Hayes is a freelance writer based in Chicago.



Castillo and Pennycuff were the first in line on October 1.

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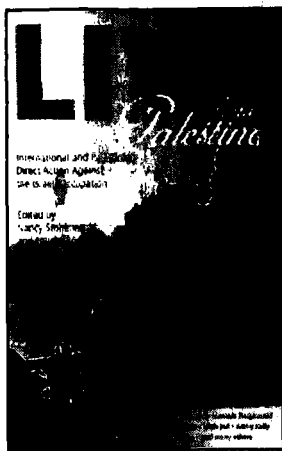
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## From Palestine

INTERNATIONAL AND PALESTINIAN  
DIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE  
ISRAELI OCCUPATION

Nancy Stohlman and  
Laurieann Aladin, editors

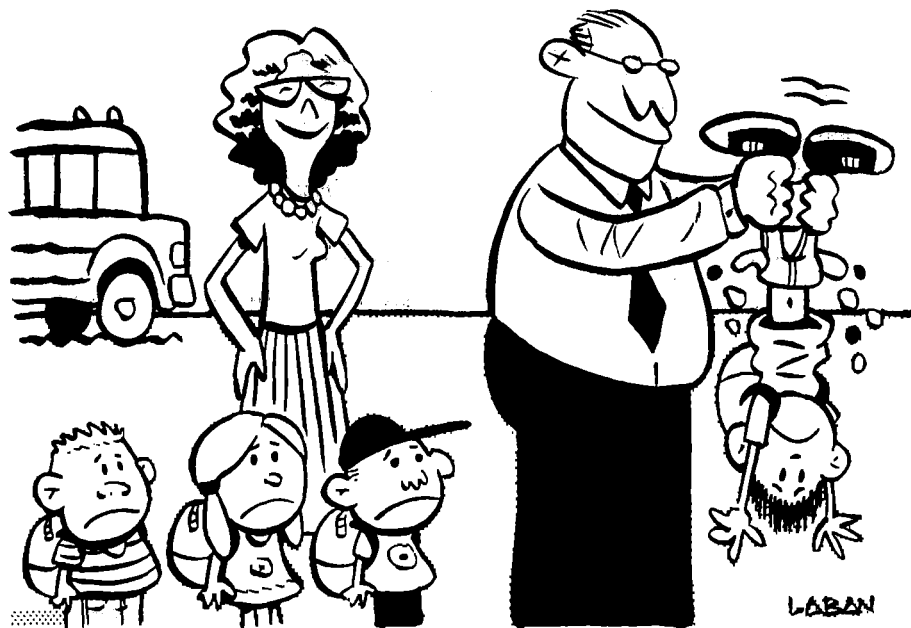
Riveting eyewitness accounts of everyday life under occupation in Palestine form the core of this collection of essays. From confrontations in olive groves to the siege of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, these accounts give incontrovertible evidence of the power of solidarity in the face of settler violence and state terror. First-person narratives are supplemented by analysis of the tactics and strategies of non-violent direct action in the context of the Israeli Occupation.

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IN PERSON

BY JIM HIGHTOWER



## Teaching Commercialism

**R**emember the field trips you took in elementary school—maybe to the fire department, a farm, a radio station or other places where you learned a bit about how things work?

Well, now those old-fashioned field trips are being updated ... and commercialized. Why send kids to the farm when we can send them to Petco, the national chain that sells animals to kids? Teachers bring classes into the local Petco outlet, where the kids hear a talking parrot, see an exotic lizard, pet a puppy ... and get coupons for free goldfish. "By the weekend," says a Petco official, "at least 10 [of the kids] will be here with their families to show them what they got to see—and to redeem the coupon."

Good grief ... they're turning field trips into come-ons for tiny shoppers, teaching the crass art of consumerism. If we let this go on, they'll be taking the tykes into toy stores next. Too late. Toys "R" Us already is hosting school field trips, offering a "mighty minds" tour of the store that lets students use the toys, puzzles, art supplies and other goodies for sale there.

This branding of young minds has become

its own industry, with companies like the Field Trip Factory operating as go-betweens to link local schools with corporate chains. This one company set up 3,300 of these student tours at Petco stores last school year.

Obviously, the chains get access to impressionable little buyers who're conveniently delivered to them by their teachers—no advertising campaign could match that. But what do the schools get? In these times of cutbacks in school budgets, they get a prepackaged, cheap outing for their classes. As one school official happily exclaimed about the corporate jaunts, "We can provide kids with experiences at no cost."

No cost? The cost is in the integrity of the educational experience and in the commercialization of our children. To help stop it, get support behind the Parents' Bill of Rights being circulated by the watchdog group Commercial Alert. Call 503-235-8012. ■

**Jim Hightower** is author of *Thieves In High Places: They've Stolen Our Country and It's Time to Take It Back* (Viking Press, 2003).



# The Truth Shall Make You Free



"Highly readable and tightly argued, *The Five Biggest Lies* does more than devastatingly refute the mendacity of the Bush Administration's Iraq policy. Christopher Scheer and his cohorts present a chilling portrait of the cabal of neo-cons who have commandeered American foreign policy, revealing the arrogance, assumptions, and contradictions that have had such disastrous consequences for our nation—and the world."

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"This book will become the required text for the coming wave of campus teach-ins and mass protests over US policy in Iraq. The authors have written the truth and the truth sets us free to reclaim our nation."

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## The Five Biggest Lies Bush Told Us about Iraq

Christopher Scheer, Robert Scheer and Lakshmi Chaudhry

\$9.95 | 160 pages ISBN: 1-58322-644-3

An up-to-the-minute synthesis of research, reporting and analysis, *The Five Biggest Lies Bush Told us About Iraq* is a tour de force collaboration produced by the respected online magazine AlterNet.org. It describes and illuminates in clear language how we came to be in a terrible situation that is likely

to get much worse unless we fundamentally rethink our current foreign policy assumptions and revitalize our own democracy. *Five Lies* is destined to be a must-read for those Americans, whatever their political stripe, trying to make sense of two years of apocalyptic rhetoric and depressing headlines.



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# Racial Bias Still Haunts Media

By Salim Muwakkil

**T**he fight to contain the monopolistic impulses of the corporate media has galvanized media activists. Their efforts have borne some fruit, mobilizing considerable opposition to a Federal Communications Commissions ruling that loosens limits on the number of stations a single company may own. On September 17 the Senate passed a full rollback of the FCC ruling.

But this sharp, almost exclusive focus on corporate ownership has drowned out other crucial concerns in the struggle for media democracy. And one of the most serious issues is the continuing problem of racial bias.

Many of our current headlines are suffused with racial content. But there's precious little effort to place that content in an understandable context. The long line of statistics that point to continuing racial inequities—in health care, incarceration, poverty, education, employment and more—are often marginalized as aberrations in a land of opportunity.

There is a "race fatigue" factor in much mainstream media coverage these days. The media message to African Americans is this: Racism is old news—get over it.

Rush Limbaugh was essentially fired for saying on air that the media was giving black NFL quarterback Donovan McNabb a pass because it was "very desirous that a black quarterback do well." His comments were troubling more for the context of his words than the content. He was hired by ESPN to attract white males ("NASCAR Dads") similarly offended by affirmative action. Limbaugh's argument feeds the notion that an unbridled beast of affirmative action is roaming the countryside, victimizing helpless whites.

This animus against affirmative action is part of a general American narrative of racial hierarchy and privilege. It's an old narrative with many subplots and subtleties (Confederate patriots thought that freeing slaves was "affirmative action"), but the overall theme is white supremacy.

An important part of the media's job during America's formative years was to transform racial hierarchy into conventional wisdom. Their success was overwhelming.

Racist assumptions have blocked African-American progress at every historical juncture, but these biases are so deeply embedded in U.S. institutions and attitudes that most of the white Americans who share them often can't detect them. Distressingly, these notions can also be found in some progressive quarters. The history of this nation's progressive movement is rife with racial rancor. And



although progressives have more openly confronted racial issues than other spheres of society in America, they still have a lot of work to do—just look at the leadership ranks of progressive organizations.

That may be one reason why the movement for media democracy, as commendable as it is, has failed to attract the attention of black activists with whom it would seem to have much in common.

"The corporate preoccupations of most white media activists have very little relevance to the everyday lives of the black people I see who are adversely affected by the media on a regular basis," explains Karen Bond, a black media activist from Evanston, Illinois. Bond says her basic struggle is to reduce media portrayals that promote negative racial stereotypes influencing the life chances of American minorities. "That's where the rubber really meets the road in the media." Ownership diversity doesn't necessarily speak to that core problem, she says. "When media had more diverse ownership, stereotypes still reigned."

Bond has a point. Media-driven stereotypes tend to drive social policy. I have no doubt that media stereotypes of black criminality help account for the incarceration epidemic afflicting black youth. One of the more recent examples of this correlation showed up in a landmark 2001

study, co-authored by Lori Dorfman of the Berkeley Media Studies Group and Vincent Schiraldi of the Justice Policy Institute.

The study found that media coverage of crime exaggerates its scope and unduly connects it to youth and race, noting that 62 percent of the poll respondents felt juvenile crime was on the increase, although violent crime by youth in 1998 was at its lowest point in more than two decades.

The authors concluded, "In an environment in which fear of youth crime and actual youth crime are so out of sync, policies affecting young people are bound to be impacted."

And they have been; during this same period, legislators across the country were racing to pass ever more onerous measures to try children as adults or to increase the range of punishment available to youthful offenders.

"A disproportionate number of perpetrators on the news are people of color, especially African Americans," the authors write. They note that a study of *Time* and *Newsweek* stories found that the term "young black males" was synonymous with the word criminal.

These cultural synonyms have helped create a social system of racial disparities in which, according to a report by Human Rights Watch, there are five times more white drug users than black ones, but African Americans are imprisoned at several times the rate of whites.

Even black men who evade prison and seek employment are less likely to find it than white men, according to work by Northwestern University sociologist Devah Pager. Her study found that white applicants with prison records were more likely to be hired than black men without records.

Race bias is still a fact in America, and media too often facilitate it. We are still haunted by notions of racial hierarchy because the United States has yet to confront the complex legacy of slavery. Progressive activists must remind themselves that a true struggle for media democracy demands they continually challenge the conventional wisdom of white supremacy. ■



# Sympathy for the Devil

By Ana Marie Cox

It came as something of a surprise to hear conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh confess an addiction to painkillers, but his drug of choice does make a curious kind of sense. Of course he'd consume a substance that gave him an irrationally euphoric worldview and made him peculiarly unfeeling—it's staunch conservatives who aren't addicted to painkillers who have some explaining to do.

More disturbing, but even less surprising, was the reaction among liberals to Limbaugh's shockingly dignified announcement on October 10 that he suffered from addiction and was taking a 30-day leave from his show to seek treatment. A list of comments Limbaugh had made regarding drug abuse over the decade and a half he's had his nationally syndicated show quickly made the e-mail rounds, and freelance and professional pundits alike chortled with schadenfreude as they compared current headlines with such hyperbolic Rushisms as "We have laws against selling drugs, pushing drugs, using drugs, importing drugs ... so if people are violating the law by doing drugs, they ought to be accused and they ought to be convicted and they ought to be sent up."

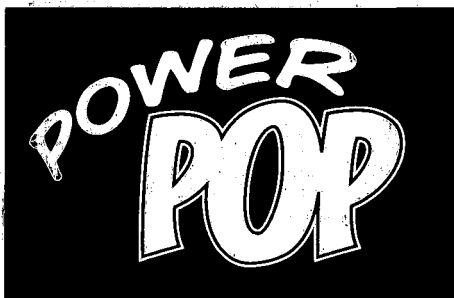
Al Franken—who is both a critic of Limbaugh and a left-wing counterpart—told reporters, "I'm looking forward to the perp walk." Online, as usual, commentators were less restrained: "Rush Limbaugh is a big fat junkie," wrote one poster to the liberal Democratic Underground Web site—[www.democraticunderground.com](http://www.democraticunderground.com).

Cries from the right for sympathy—and preemptive defenses against charges of hypocrisy—erupted with just as much predictability. Many attempted to draw a distinction between Limbaugh's past outbursts against illegal drug use and his current addiction to legal (albeit illegally obtained) drugs.

"From a moral standpoint, there's a difference between people who go out and seek a high and get addicted and the millions of Americans dealing with pain who inadvertently get addicted," arch-conservative Gary Bauer told *Newsweek*—as if Limbaugh's costly habit was some kind of accident that crept up on him unawares,

kind of like how your bills at the end of the month always seem higher than they should be. "Let's see, heating, electricity, gas, TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS on pain pills! Geez, how'd that happen?"

Bauer's predictable remarks were all the more offensive for the tacit premise of contemporary drug policy they left magisterially intact: If Limbaugh's out-of-control painkiller jones was an understandable



overextension of a standard prescription, well, then, the misery of a heroin addict has to be simple justice.

Bauer's comments are especially ludicrous in light of what Limbaugh had to say. "I am not making any excuses. You know, over the years athletes and celebrities have emerged from treatment centers to great fanfare and praise for conquering great demons. They are said to be great role models and examples for others," he said. "Well, I am no role model. I refuse to let anyone think I am doing something great here, when there are people you never hear about, who face long odds and never resort to such escapes. They are the role models."

I feel sorry for Limbaugh. And I find myself frustrated with those who seem to be enjoying the spectacle of his decline. To fling charges of hypocrisy at Limbaugh now, while it may light a smug little glow in most leftists, casts a dark shadow on the argument so many of us have made for so many years—that addiction is a disease, that treatment and not prison, or public ridicule, is the best response to it.

Focusing on Limbaugh's tragedy also distracts from the true villain of this little morality play: Purdue Pharma, the manufacturer of Limbaugh's beloved "little

blues" (as he called them in e-mails to his maid/dealer). Purdue makes more than \$1 billion a year off OxyContin and has largely resisted pleas from drug abuse advocates to make its bestselling narcotic less addictive and more difficult to resell. In the face of its huge profits, Purdue's \$10,000 "grants" to local police forces to help them launch sting operations and even its multi-million ad campaign to "promote awareness about prescription drug abuse" seem like window dressing—which they probably are. The company also has successfully fought off several dozen class-action lawsuits seeking damages for what they claim was the manufacturer's foreknowledge of the pills' potential for misuse.

Criticism of the company's marketing tactics date back a few years—they appealed directly to pain patients, and thus expanded the drug's potential market much further beyond the cancer patients for whom it had been approved. Purdue Pharma has pledged to do better, but just last January, the Food and Drug Administration cited the company for placing ads that "omit and mini-

**I find myself frustrated with those who seem to be enjoying the spectacle of his decline.**

mize the serious safety risks associated with OxyContin and promote it for uses beyond which have been proven safe and effective."

Thanks in large part to these kinds of marketing practices, addiction to prescription drugs has become one of the fastest-growing categories of abuse in the country.

About 2.6 million people misuse painkillers. I have no doubt that many of them are conservatives and that even more are assholes of one sort another. But I think we'd all like each one of them treated with dignity and fairness. We'd also like each one of them to be able to afford, as Limbaugh can, a luxury inpatient treatment program. Let's hope Limbaugh emerges from rehab with some sense of how lucky he is. ■

*Notice a change? See page 2 for details.*

# THE FIRST

By Joel Bleifuss

## The More You Watch ...

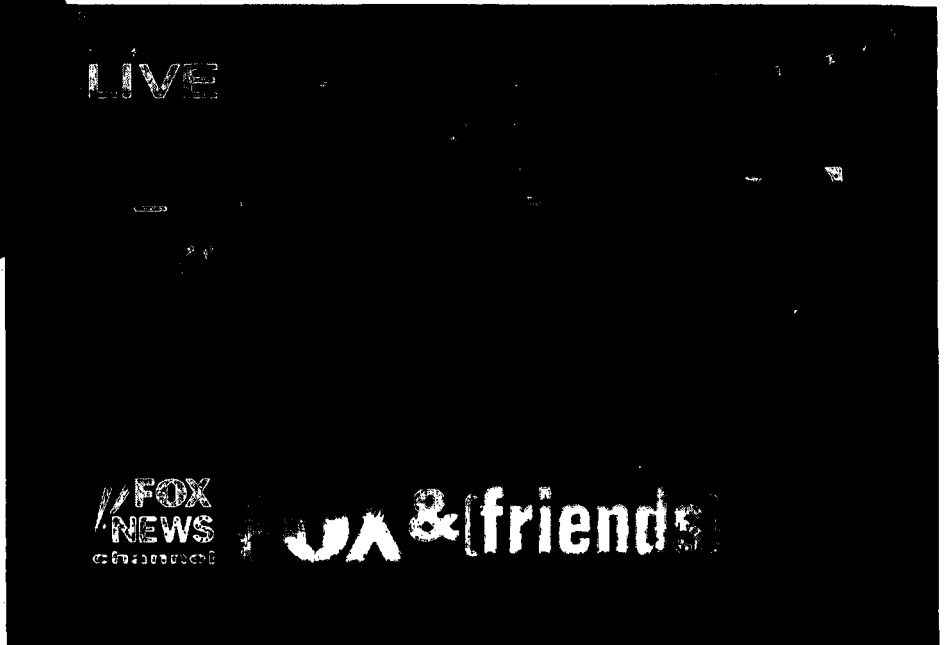
It's old news that many Americans are know-nothings when it comes to Iraq. According to a *Washington Post* poll in August, 32 percent of Americans believed it was "very likely" that "Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks." Another poll found that 20 percent of Americans believed that "Iraq did use chemical or biological weapons in the war."

Researchers at the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) in Washington have plumbed the abyss of this ignorance. Their mission: to discover why "a substantial portion of the public had a number of misperceptions that were demonstrably false [and that] have played a key role in generating and maintaining approval for the decision to go to war."

From June through September, PIPA polled 3,334 people, asking them about three of "the most egregious misperceptions."

- Evidence of links between Iraq and al-Qaeda has been found.
- Weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq.
- World public opinion favored the United States going to war with Iraq.

The study, "Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War," found that 60 percent of respondents held one or more of the three misperceptions—an ignorance that played into the Bush administration's drumbeat for war. PIPA discovered that "among those with just one of the misperceptions, 53 percent supported the war—rising to 78 percent for two of the misperceptions and to 86 percent for those with all three." Conversely, among



Welcome to the reality distortion chamber; please leave your bullshit detector at the door.

those "with none of the three misperceptions," 77 percent opposed the war.

So why did so many Americans hold opinions that were false "or were at odds with the dominant view in the intelligence community?" the PIPA researchers wondered. Was this ignorance "a function of an individual's source of news?"

Indeed it was. After asking respondents to name their "primary source of news," PIPA discovered that "Fox News watchers were most likely to hold misperceptions." Conversely, an "overwhelming majority" of NPR/PBS consumers "did not have any of the three misconceptions." (Indeed, 80 percent of Fox News viewers held one misperception and 45 percent held all three. In contrast, 23 percent of those getting their news from NPR/PBS held one misperception and only 4 percent held all three.)

The researchers point out that it is true that audiences for network news shows vary as to education and political affiliation. For example, Fox viewers are more Republican while PBS/NPR consumers are better educated and more Democratic. (They also found that Republicans and those with lower education are more likely to hold misperceptions.)

Yet source of news is still a determining factor. Of the Republicans who get their news from Fox, the average rate for the three key misperceptions was 54 percent,

while for Republicans who get their news from PBS/NPR the average rate is 32 percent. On the Democratic side of things, 48 percent of Democrats who watch Fox believe that the United States found a direct Iraqi link to al-Qaeda, while not a single Democrat who relies on PBS/NPR believed any such nonsense.

But "most striking," say the PIPA researchers, is that among Fox News viewers, those who watch the "fair and balanced" network the most are the ones most likely to hold demonstrably unbalanced misperceptions.

Steven Kull, the director of PIPA and the study's principal investigator, says, "If people are getting misperceptions, and we can empirically demonstrate that they are, then the media has a responsibility to offset that and counteract them. The media hasn't been diligent enough in taking into account the way that perceptions and impressions are formed around a quite significant public policy issue."

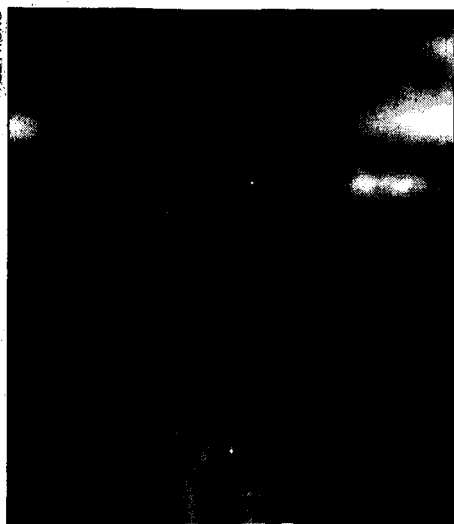
As for Fox, Kull says "research shows that Fox gives more airtime to the administration's representatives and that may be one of the key explanations why Fox viewers have these misperceptions."

## Dirty Tricks

When Robert Novak published the information that Joseph Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, was a CIA officer, he was



doing double time as a political operative for the White House. Some high official decided that Wilson must be punished for having exposed the administration's disinformation campaign about Iraq attempting to get uranium from Niger to build a bomb.



Joseph Wilson

That the White House was out to get Wilson is not in doubt. As the *Washington Post* reported on September 28, "Yesterday, a senior administration official said that before Novak's column ran, two top White House officials called at least six Washington journalists and disclosed the identity and occupation of Wilson's wife. ... 'Clearly, it was meant purely and simply for revenge,' the senior official said of the alleged leak."

Wilson thinks the planted story was a warning—a successful one. "I've always thought that this was designed much more to intimidate others and discourage them from coming forward than anything to do with me," he told National Public Radio. "[T]here were any number of people from the analytical community who had spoken privately to reporters about the pressure that they felt when the vice president, his chief of staff and Mr. Gingrich went out to the CIA for briefings. Now as a result of that, a number of senators called for hearings and urged that these people step forward and speak. ... Since Mr. Novak's article appeared, that sort of information appears to have dried up."

Larry Johnson, a former CIA officer and a Republican, has given the White House

notice that the CIA knows who in the administration planted the story—and implicitly that this betrayal will not go unanswered. Interviewed on Pacifica's "Democracy Now," Johnson said, "I've been told by someone who I believe has direct knowledge that it came out of the Old Executive Office Building. I'm not gonna identify specific individuals because I think that has to be carried out by the Justice Department to investigate. And I don't want to try people in public." He gave the press this tip: "The reporters aren't doing their job. How about asking the follow-up question [to the one 'Did it come out of the White House?'] 'Did it come out of the Old Executive Office Building?' " That is where Vice President Dick Cheney has his office.

## Dear Editor

"The quality of life and security for the citizens has been largely restored, and we are a large part of why that has happened," reads the letter that the soldier in Iraq wrote to his hometown newspaper. It continues:

"The fruits of all our soldiers' efforts are clearly visible in the streets of Kirkuk today. There is very little trash in the streets, many more people in the markets and shops, and children have returned to school. I am proud of the work we are doing here in Iraq and I hope all of your readers are as well."

The same letter appeared in at least 11 different newspapers. The *Olympian* of Snohomish, Washington, noticed the scam when it received this letter from two local soldiers. These letters to the editor were supposedly sent by soldiers in the 2nd Battalion of the 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment. One of the soldiers, in a hospital recovering from shrapnel wounds to his legs, had no idea he had written the letter. Another soldier's stepmother expressed concern that the bogus letter from her stepson would give legitimacy to a war she did not support. "There are a lot of Americans that are not in support of this war that would like to see them returned home," she told the *Olympian*.

## We Spy

John Poindexter's ill-fated Total Information Awareness program, a database designed to allow citizens to fight the

war on terrorism by reporting the suspicious activities of their fellow citizens, has left one good legacy.

Coming soon to a URL near you, the Government Information Awareness (GIA) program. Debuting later this year, GIA will be an online database to which the public can feed information about government activities, government officials and political figures—including data on their business affiliations and campaign donations.

"It will be a sort of citizens' intelligence agency," Chris Csikszentmihalyi told *New Scientist*. Csikszentmihalyi and Ryan McKinley, researchers at MIT's Media Laboratory, started the project this summer only to curtail it out of fear that MIT might be subject to libel suits, given the information presented to GIA is not verified and could therefore be false and defamatory. To get around this legal quandary, the two media activists are taking a chapter from Napster. GIA will store the information via file sharing all over the Internet.



## Just Add Water

Five West Texas men on probation have been caught using the Whizzinator in attempt to avoid drug testing (www.whizzinator.com). Selling at \$150 each and coming in five different flesh tones, the Whizzinator is a prosthetic penis attached to a jock-strap like device that contains dehydrated, drug-free urine in the pouch. Just add water and squeeze ... and hope your probation officer isn't as savvy a sleuth as Lubbock County's Tom Madigan. "A body part when it's up against a plastic cup isn't going to go 'clink,'" he said. ■



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# What is the progressive media strategy?

## Seize the Moment

BY SUSAN J. DOUGLAS

Many progressive Americans sense that we are at a watershed moment in our relationship to the mainstream media. Progressive media outlets themselves feel that they, too, may be at a turning point.

The media reform movement, spearheaded by Bob McChesney and others, aroused only marginal passion several years ago but it took off like a rocket in 2003 as a result of unprecedented FCC arrogance, shameless media jingoism and superb grassroots organizing. This past summer, the scales began to fall off the eyes of the news-magazines and TV networks (with the exception of CNN), and they began asking tough questions about the motives and honesty of Team Bush. The bestseller list is no longer the province of the far right, as Al Franken, Paul Krugman, Michael Moore, Molly Ivins and others soar to the top. Web sites like MoveOn.org have become major political players. And now we have the highly energized National Conference on Media Reform.

Many of us, then, are thinking about how to capitalize on such a moment. Can we turn this constellation of events into an ongoing and effective coalition with clout? Can we vie with the right—which dominates public affairs programming and now has its own cable news channel—to shape what becomes the “common

sense” about what kind of public policy is best for the country?

### Look to the past

To answer these questions we need to remind ourselves of a little history. Democrats and progressives today are roughly where Republicans and the new right were in the mid- to late-1970s: out of power and with a highly motivated, even enraged base determined to change the course of national politics. So what did the right do during the dark post-Watergate years? They studied the strategy of the liberals and left in the '60s and '70s, then copied or trumped them.

From the right's point of view, the news came to be dominated first by the Civil Rights movement—with its explosive, opinion-altering imagery—then by the anti-war movement, the women's movement and the environmental movement. They heard chants and sound bites that got major coverage, from “credibility gap” to demonstrators yelling “The whole world is watching” during the police riots at the 1968 Democratic convention to feminists asserting “the personal is political.” They saw previously marginal political organizations from SDS to the Black Panthers to NOW use provocative strategies to get on the air

(even though the coverage they got was mixed at best).

They saw Walter Cronkite turn against the war, Gloria Steinem appear on the “Dick Cavett Show,” Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* become a bestseller. They saw how liberals had used the courts and public opinion about social justice to get around a racist and sexist Congress in order to promote integration and secure a woman's right to control her reproductive life. In other words, from their point of view, liberals and the left were setting the media agenda.

### Set the agenda

The right did not take this lying down—they studied journalistic routines and preferences and learned how to cater to them so they could set the agenda instead. What had been for the left fairly spontaneous, often ad hoc media tactics, became in the hands of the right a much more calculated and coordinated long-term strategy. Phyllis Schlafly, for example, staged “counter” events to compete with feminist conferences and crafted newsworthy, titillating sound bites insisting that the ERA would mandate coed bathrooms. And she won the day on the ERA.

The right also moved behind the scenes. They shrewdly developed their own organizations to influence the media, and with tons more money than the Black Panthers ever had. But the Heritage Foundation et al. were not out in the streets; they were in their cubicles, cranking out position paper after position paper for journalists. These think tanks also began funding books, and then buying them in bulk so they'd rise to the bestseller list.

# What is the progressive media strategy?

Walter Cronkite, Gloria Steinem, a MoveOn ad against the war in Iraq, Al Franken, a poster for Michael Moore's film, *Bowling for Columbine*.



## Turn the tables

The right brilliantly invented the rhetoric of inversion and deployed it in their sound bites so that common sense got turned on its head. "Class warfare" suddenly referred to efforts to tax the rich, patriarchy was renamed "family values," and poverty became "cycle of dependency." Most recently, "leave no child behind" (stolen from the Children's Defense Fund) became a fig leaf covering up efforts to defund virtually everything that helps poor kids in the United States. And the right repeatedly charged the media with displaying a "liberal bias," accused NPR of being communist and got its funds cut in Congress, and pressured all the networks and PBS to feature more right-wing opinions. (Of course, it didn't hurt that under Reagan the FCC began its long-term deregulatory slide, which included eliminating the Fairness Doctrine and clearing the way for media consolidation.) And, well, here we are.

It is time to cast off our collective amnesia about how the right stole these strategies from the left and then made them their own. Because in forgetting this theft, we see the right's tactics as *de novo*, as theirs, as too shabby or pandering to reclaim. But if we are to take advantage of the current momentum, a moment that gains enormous sustenance from most people's fear that they are now living in a cross between a theocracy and

a monarchy, we need to play a much stronger role in setting the media agenda. We need not think that we have to copy from the right to succeed. That cripples us. Instead, we need to think about rediscovering our own agenda-setting roots from the '60s, study which revisions of them by the right have worked, and then forge ahead.

For example, I have gotten into debates with other progressives whom I respect enormously on the need for sound bites that play well and help people see things differently. My colleagues have argued that sound bites dumb things down, and that's not what the left is about. Fair enough. But you know, I think "Equal Pay for Equal Work" was a great sound bite, and while we're not there yet, it helped revolutionize many women's pay scales and, thus, their lives.

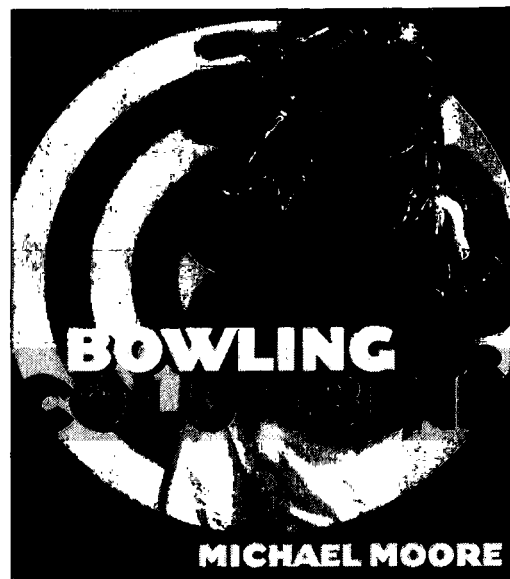
So, first, let's look at what's already working. Despite the media shift to the right, we are getting our foot in the door. Sut Jhally's highly successful Media Education Foundation (which he started from nothing with his own credit cards) now sells media literacy video tapes to schools, colleges and universities all across the country, and millions of students see them. Progressive Web sites are getting massive numbers of hits, and actions as varied as anti-WTO demonstrations, fundraising for Howard Dean, and the anti-war efforts of MoveOn.org and oth-

ers have been impressively well-coordinated online. *Nation* editor Katrina vanden Heuvel does get on PBS's "Newshour" and cable shows like "Media Matters"; Bob McChesney and John Nichols did appear on Bill Moyers' "NOW"; and Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* was one of the longest running films in theaters last year and won an Oscar. Time to push the door open wider.

## Make it funny

Progressives are rediscovering the enormous power of satire and humor (remember guerilla theater, W.I.T.C.H. hexing Wall Street and the various yip-pie antics?) to discredit the status quo. More to the point, Al Franken, Michael Moore and Paul Krugman do not have to rely on bulk sales by partisan organizations to keep their books on the top: people are, actually, like, reading these books. We may get syndicated progressive talk show hosts or even a progressive network; the TV show "Progressive Week in Review," sponsored by Ben & Jerry's may be a bit further off, but not because people wouldn't watch it.

And while many of us have made bashing the mainstream media a regular pastime, let's not forget how disgusted many journalists are right now. The *New York Times* does give us Frank Rich and Paul Krugman; even the anti-feminist, Clinton-bashing Maureen Dowd has turned to



viscerating Bush. *Newsweek* has had a series of terrific investigative reports about the failed hunt for Osama bin Laden and the complete (and ideologically driven) bungling of post-war planning for Iraq.

What continues to frustrate us? Superficial, sloppy reporting about Iraq and the virtual neglect of Afghanistan; the inability of progressives who might know something about a range of issues to get their views on the nightly news or political talk shows; the dominance of talk radio by right-wing, homophobic, racist, sexist Neanderthals; the marginalizing of what we see as utter common sense as "radical" or "left wing," even though, for example, most Americans agree with us that we need a national health care system now; and all of this is made possible by the corporate stranglehold on media ownership.

So how do we confront these problems?

### Build on strengths

Rather than focus on how we're shut out, assess our strengths and build on them.

Work to develop more cooperative relations with the mainstream media and to pressure them, constantly, to include progressive assessments of issues on radio and TV.

Design a more consistent and reliable agenda-setting machine that issues (or coordinates the issuing of) timely press releases and studies, especially those that show the similarities between many peo-

ple's views and the policy positions of progressives.

Improve fundraising strategies. (I know, I know—but there are people with money out there who don't want to be ruled by an American Taliban either.)

Most of these things are already being done, with varying degrees of success, but they need to be brought together and managed more effectively and strategically. All of which leads to?

### Use what works

Establish an organization, or beef up an existing one that will be the agreed-upon clearinghouse for coordinating collective efforts.

No one wants to reinvent the wheel and have a new organization do what existing ones already handle just fine. Rather, we need a kind of overarching information office that synchronizes all these efforts into an agenda-altering juggernaut.

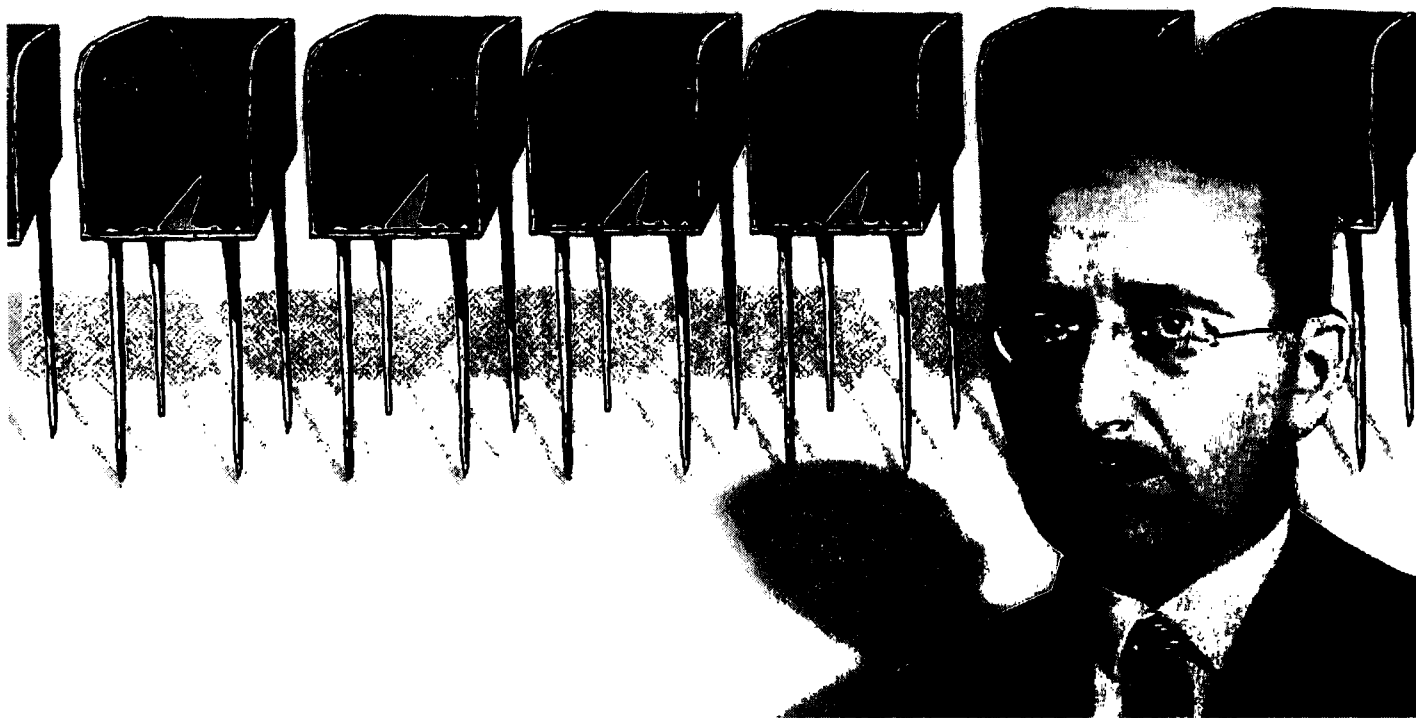
None of this is quick or easy. It took the Republicans about 10 years to break out of the blocks (in the mid-'80s); by the mid-'90s, even a Democratic president had to respond to, co-opt and, in the end, be savaged by their agenda. We have to learn something that is hard for many of us, especially given the emergency before us: patience—and the ability to take the long view.

In other words, we need a blueprint for a more tightly coordinated and, dare I say

it, professional organization that focuses, like the proverbial laser beam, on media strategy. Others may disagree with this proposal, but I think it's crucial. I—like many of you—have been to various alternative media conferences over the years. We all get jazzed up and reaffirmed, vow to change the media landscape, and then go back to our individual, sometimes isolated jobs where we become, once again, too overburdened to see such a mission through. Or we get bogged down in debates between purists and pragmatists. Given the deadly serious dangers Team Bush poses, the latter is a luxury we cannot afford.

Others with more organizational savvy than I, who actually have on-the-ground experience in the Independent Press Association, AlterNet, FAIR or MoveOn, could no doubt propose various blueprints for how to proceed. But we need a few people whose only job would be to coordinate and deploy all of our efforts along a series of clearly defined goals that would then be updated every few months. The articles that follow provide more detailed assessments of our failures, successes and new opportunities. But let's keep our eye on the ball as we plan for the future. Team Bush is the most dangerous administration we've ever had—and that's saying something. They must not be permitted to take our country from us. And a savvy, hard-nosed, multi-pronged yet synchronized media strategy is essential to this end. ■





# Winning the War of Ideas

BY CHRISTIAN PARENTI

If the triumph of the New Right could be blamed on one person, that villain might be Austrian economist F.A. Hayek (1899-1992). Hayek's career included a Nobel Prize, many books, and long stints at the London School of Economics and the University of Chicago.

Hayek's ideas were most famously laid out in his best-selling *The Road to Serfdom*, which espoused a defense of unbridled market economics. State planning, unless it was "planning for competition," was totalitarianism. The slippery slope started with welfare and ended in "fascist communism."

But Hayek was no mere academic scribbler or economist—he also was an activist who inspired and organized the modern political right's "war of ideas."

Hayek pointed the way for the conservative think-tank movement of today and incited the mainstream policy shift from Keynesian demand management to free-market supply-side economics.

The old professor's political notes also raise interesting questions about the role of intellectuals and ideas in social change—questions the American left might do well to consider.

For Hayek, liberals—by which he

meant followers of classical free-market economics—had to avoid anti-intellectualism, pragmatism and short-term struggles. Calling for utopian thinking, radical positions and a long-term strategy, Hayek urged liberals to imitate socialists. And that advice, in many ways, launched the modern Anglo-American New Right.

## The dark days of collectivism

The late-'30s were an awful time for free marketeers. Their beloved capitalist system had led to the worst depression in world history, and radical labor movements and interventionist state planning held the field in much of Europe and the United States; moderate thinkers like John Dewey suddenly called for the "destruction of capitalism." Increased economic regulation, state planning, nationalization, expanded social welfare and public works appeared to the far right

as harbingers of total disaster.

Against this backdrop a group of leading conservative intellectuals from the United States and Western Europe met in 1938 to discuss the "crisis of liberalism." Conference participants, including Hayek, sought to re-legitimize market economics. Nothing substantial emerged from the conference and World War II soon stalled the group's attempts to assemble again. But the event planted ideological seeds and brought together many of the men (they were almost exclusively male) who would become the leading theorists of the right.

Hayek revived the project after the war. With the economic support of Swiss businessman Albert Hunold, Hayek called another conference, this time at the Hotel du Parc on the slopes of Mont Pelerin in the Swiss Alps. From this exclusive but by no means secret gathering emerged the Mont Pelerin Society. The American delegation included Milton Friedman and several of his University of Chicago colleagues. Henry Hazlitt, who spent most of his career at the *New York Times*, represented American journalism. From the London School of Economics came several big guns, including Karl Popper. Other intellectual luminaries studied the list of attendees.

According to the Mont Pelerin Society's founding statement, "a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and ... the rule of law" threatened Western Civilization. That danger was exacerbated by "a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved."

In a paper titled "The Intellectuals and Socialism," Hayek wrote that the task of the Mont Pelerin Society would be to win "the war of ideas" and roll back progressive state planning, nationalization, and welfare. He argued that ideas, particularly big ideas, are highly political. In effect, victory for the right would require creating what Antonio Gramsci separately called a counter hegemonic bloc, that is, ideologically and institutionally anchored control over the assumptions and beliefs that frame political discourse.

## Remaking common sense

Crucial in this battle, argued Hayek, was the long-term impact of thinking and explaining. In marked contrast with much of today's political wisdom—in which both left and right seem most concerned with spin, PR and immediate questions—Hayek disparaged the efficacy of day-to-day journalistic and political fights. "What to the contemporary observer appears as the battle of conflicting interests has indeed often been decided long before in a clash of ideas confined to narrow circles," Hayek wrote. Rather than control specific issues, Hayek sought to remake common sense, to control the intellectual context in which policy debates took place. The linchpin in this strategy was intellectual work.

"In the United States even more than elsewhere," explained Hayek, "a strong belief prevails that the influence of the intellectuals on politics is negligible. This is no doubt true of the power of intel-

lectuals to make their peculiar opinions of the moment influence decisions, of the extent to which they can sway the popular vote on questions on which they differ from the current views of the masses. Yet over somewhat longer periods they have probably never exercised so great an influence as they do today. ... This power they wield by shaping public opinion."

For Hayek, controlling the thoughts of the intelligentsia meant eventual control of society; as he saw it they were the key promulgators and shapers of received wisdom and "the politics of tomorrow."

But who were these people? Hayek's definition was rather broad—he made a distinction between scholars or experts and intellectuals. The latter were not original thinkers but "dealers in second-hand ideas," and included filmmakers, teachers, artists, clergy, novelists, broadcasters, some scientists and, most of all, journalists. Because of the intellectuals' "habitual intercourse with the printed word," and

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# What is the progressive media strategy?

the general respect commanded as professionals, they were "carriers of new ideas outside their own fields" and, therefore, shaped the politics of the future.

Here Hayek's thoughts contrast sharply with the socialist idea that intellectual work should both engage with and emerge from popular social movements; the Austrian don's ideas were more elitist. "The main lesson which the true liberal must learn from the success of the socialists," he explained, "is that it was their courage to be Utopian which gained them the support of the intellectuals and therefore an influence on public opinion which is [now] daily making possible what only recently seemed utterly remote."

Hayek concluded his article with a critique of pragmatism. "Those who have concerned themselves exclusively with what seemed practicable in the existing state of opinion have constantly found that even this has rapidly become politically impossible as the result of changes

in a public opinion which they have done nothing to guide. Unless we can make the philosophic foundations of a free society once more a living intellectual issue, and its implementation a task which challenges the ingenuity and imagination of our liveliest minds, the prospects of freedom are indeed dark. But if we can regain that belief in the power of ideas, which was the mark of liberalism at its best, the battle is not lost."

## Institutions for thought

Indeed, the battle was far from lost. In response to Hayek's call for intellectual warfare, several wealthy industrialists joined Hunold in sponsoring right-wing education and publishing. Among them were Alan Fisher in the United Kingdom and Harold Luhnnow, Pierre Goodrich and Richard Earhart in the United States. What they created, inspired by Hayek, wasn't so much a plan as a milieu. Through steady repetition of arguments and constant produc-

tion of articles, pamphlets, books, reports and conferences, these Mont Pelerin Society activists created intellectual momentum and legitimacy for their once-discredited ideology.

By the '60s and early '70s, Mont Pelerin Society fellow travelers had established a number of increasingly prominent think-tanks—such as the Institute for Economic Affairs in England and the Heritage Foundation in the United States—from which they waged an unrelenting assault on the idea of government intervention in the economy.

Hayek's comrades also began cultivating rising conservative politicians, including Margaret Thatcher. By the late '70s, Hayek's spawn had successfully brought the Tories and the GOP to new, extreme-right positions. Likewise, many members of the Mont Pelerin Society had prominent positions in universities and the media, from which they disseminated their neo-liberal gospel. Among the list of think-tank and university players who received part of their education with the society are Michael Novak (American Enterprise Institute), Thomas Sowell (Hoover Institution) and Deepak Lal (Cato Institute).

## What's in it for progressives?

Ultimately, progressives cannot and should not imitate all of Hayek's and the Mont Pelerin Society's methods. That worldview and tactical repertoire is intensely elitist, in that it relied more on institutional hierarchy than popular education and mobilization.

Nonetheless, elements of the strategy might offer a useful corrective to the increasing anti-intellectualism, moralism and hyper-pragmatism of American progressives—a pragmatism that at times avoids the most important political questions, shows little political self-confidence and thinks hardly at all about the next 20 years.

Consider the state of affairs among most nonprofit, single-issue campaigns and progressive trade unions. While there are valiant and laudable exceptions (the Brecht Forum in New York jumps to mind, as does the educational program of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union), most of these types of organizations focus on the imperatives of

"Information is the currency of democracy."

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the short-term: the next grant, the next bill, the next contract, and so forth. Frequently missing is any sense of a long-term project of political education around a social and political-economic program. Under such conditions staff, particularly young staff, often burn out because they lack the benefit of a deep, historically informed education that would place their work in a broader context. What they get instead is emergency-themed moralizing about the need to sacrifice. Or consider all those who cycle through the left; many people join our ranks only to quickly check out, inoculated as it were, having done some time and found the whole enterprise ridiculous and shrill. Fueling this process is the fact that new activists or organizational personnel often are not encouraged to study, think and rethink. They are not treated as potential converts (for lack of a better word) to the lifelong struggle for justice. Nor are their minds treated as important parts of the struggle. When left and progressive organizations do work on education their efforts are frequently apolitical, anti-

intellectual and have the self-help feel of vocational training for the movement: "Capacity building," "media literacy" and "community empowerment" are the buzzwords of this genre.

Without dissecting the particulars of this or that group, one must simply ask: Does the left take ideas seriously? Does the left have popular theories of how intellectual work—the politics of political explanation and storytelling—affects politics? Does it have a forward-looking intellectual strategy? The answer, largely, is no.

While the movement gets on with the business of activism, ideas degenerate into decadent and perverted playthings for academics, who do not help matters with their careerism, impenetrable language and cloistered disdain for reaching broad audiences. But that's another story, or should I say "narrative."

Hayek invites us to reconsider the role of ideas and the long-term timeframe of their impact. He reminds us that having a clear intellectual program and thinking—which in our case should be

done by everybody, not only specialists—is not a luxury but a necessity. He reminds us that today's political struggles, while essential, usually offer only a narrow range of outcomes. Short-term struggles are massively important, but we will lose most of these fights, and thus must ask ourselves what lasting, ideological or intellectual impact such lost fights can and should deliver. Hayek invites us to be bold and imaginative and, if not utopian, at least radical in our vision and plan. Finally, he points out that in the long-term the big questions are always up for grabs. ■

**Christian Parenti** is author of *The Soft Cage: Surveillance in America from Slavery to the War on Terror*, (Basic Books); he wrote this during a fellowship at the Summer Think Tank of the Humanities Institute at the University of Minnesota.

## PROFILE

# PR Watch Has Its Eyes Open

Ten years ago John Stauber decided to take on the media arm of corporate America: the public relations industry. From his home in Madison, Wisconsin, he founded *PR Watch*, a quarterly magazine that tracked the machinations of the hired guns who stealthily attempt to manage public perception and thereby shape public policy.

Today, *PR Watch* has grown into an institution that, in addition to putting out the magazine, has an active Web presence ([www.prwatch.org](http://www.prwatch.org)) and an annual budget of \$200,000, which comes from grants, donations, subscriptions and profits from the four books Stauber and his col-

league Sheldon Rampton have written. Their most recent, *Weapons of Mass Deception*, which was excerpted in the September 1 *In These Times*, has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for the past seven weeks, despite the fact that the only mainstream review it received was in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

On the Web, Stauber and Rampton continue to unmask deception in a daily feature, "Spin of the Day." On October 15, for example, they reported that Mohammed Odeh al-Rehaief, the Iraqi who helped in the so called "rescue" of Jessica Lynch, received a \$300,000 advance from Harper Collins for his new book, *Because Each*

*Life is Precious: Why an Iraqi Man Came to Risk Everything for Pvt. Jessica Lynch*. In addition to the book contract from a company owned by Rupert Murdoch, Rehaief was given asylum in the United States and a job at the D.C. lobbying firm the Livingston Group. His book is being promoted by his Livingston Group colleague Lauri Fitz-Pegado, who is infamous for her work at Hill & Knowlton PR in 1990 coaching the Kuwaiti girl called "Nayirah" in her shocking but phony testimony to Congress that she'd seen Iraqi soldiers murdering Kuwaiti babies.

Stauber measures success in part from the phone calls he and Rampton receive from

reporters who read their first book, *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You*, while in journalism school. "Our work has helped to highlight the extent to which the mainstream corporate media passes on public relations as news," says Stauber. "About 40 percent of what they read, see or hear in the mainstream media is a result of government or corporate public relations campaigns. What we are seeing is a continuation of a very bad trend. As magazines and newspapers and TV networks and stations downsize journalists, they are not reducing news coverage, they are just using more public relations and passing it off as news."

—Joel Bleifuss

# the candidates on the media

**P**erhaps it's surprising that most Democratic candidates are now speaking out on media ownership and deregulation of the public airwaves. It may be less surprising that most of their positions became known only after a grassroots campaign highlighted the public's discontent with the FCC vote last June to further deregulate the media. Either way, after decades of regulation rollbacks, ownership concentration and commercialism of news, issues that progressives have been active on for decades seem to have made it to the spotlight of mainstream politics.

—Williams Cole



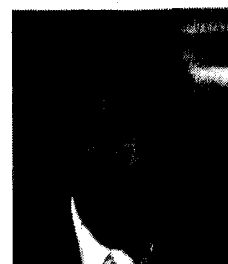
**CAROL MOSELEY BRAUN** She has a history of working for diversity in media, fighting against the elimination of tax credits to minority broadcasters by the FCC in 1995 and working with the National Association of Black Journalists to foster diversity in the media workplace. She lost some of these battles, and minorities still own only 3.8 percent of the nation's TV and cable channels and radio stations. She has been silent on the FCC battles. As ambassador to New Zealand she oversaw that country's promise to adhere to international copyright and trademark laws enforced by the United States. She supported the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which rolled back FCC regulation.

**WESLEY CLARK** While enjoying a late-entry surge in coverage as a media darling, Clark has virtually nothing to say about media—although his comments to Aaron Brown on CNN defending Michael Moore's right to speak out against the war during the Academy Awards may bode well for this ex-general's media policies and respect for diverse opinion. He said, "People in the armed forces not only respect dissent, they expect dissent, as long as it's directed at the policies, not the people."



**HOWARD DEAN** It's to be expected that Dean is a great proponent of all things wired. Credited with revolutionizing campaigning and fundraising on the Internet, he knows his constituency well. He's said that "universal Internet access should be a federal goal" and associated himself with Laurence Lessig, a main proponent of open source and the public domain. But while his online campaign, blogging and talk of bottom-up strategy is considerable, he has skirted taking a position on the legislation posed to extend copyright, perhaps because many of his supporters are executives in the entertainment industry. Dean also is very critical of the FCC deregulation, saying that it was "one of the foremost issues on citizens' minds" and that the proposed actions would threaten free speech and free discussion. He praised congressional delay of the deregulation in mid-September, endorses a permanent reversal and even states that "we need to consider going even further than that by reregulating media ownership."

**JOHN EDWARDS** This Southern populist also jumped on the criticism of Michael Powell's FCC proposals, capitalizing on how they would even further concentrate media outlets in his rural constituencies. He co-sponsored legislation to reverse the decision, saying that it "exemplifies everything that is wrong with this administration," that Powell had "betrayed the public trust," and that "he and the FCC must be stopped." Unfortunately, one gets the impression that Edwards is more interested in protecting the "diversity" of Billy Graham's evangelistic meetings than true progressive voices. He has a history of supporting digital divide and broadband legislation and fighting for privacy issues around the commercial use of data. "I believe that consumers, not dot-com companies, should have the power to control the use and disclosure of buying habits, financial and medical records, and other personal information."





**DICK GEPHARDT** The career Representative from Missouri made only a squeak during the FCC imbroglio, calling the decision "anticonsumer and anticompetition." Perhaps his history of support (alongside Republicans Billy Tauzin and Trent Lott) for Andrew W. Levin when he was a contender for an FCC commissioner slot in 2001 might have some bearing on his tepid stances on media. Levin recently got the job of senior vice president-government relations for none other than Clear Channel Communications.

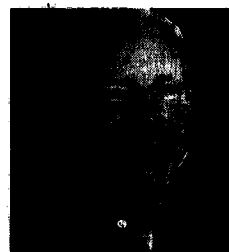
**JOHN KERRY** He was one of the most outspoken candidates regarding the FCC rollback of regulations, but it didn't help him as much as other

candidates. He said the FCC decision "represents the continuation of a conscious pattern—a new kind of institutionalized unfairness" and that "Maverick Republican Teddy Roosevelt understood the dangers of corporate consolidation, but the point seems lost on Mr. Bush." He was quick to work in the Senate to nullify the FCC's vote, saying, "The FCC should do more than rubber-stamp the business plans of narrow economic interests." Kerry has sponsored broadband tax credit legislation, was an original supporter of the E-Rate and said the FCC and the Bush administration had shown a "disheartening" lack of interest in closing "the very real digital divide." He supported the 1996 Telecommunications Act.



**DENNIS KUCINICH** He is the only candidate to come out openly in favor of copyright reform with concrete policy ideas. He has written extensively on his blog—and also was a guest on Lessig's—about media concentration, stating that if he were president he would use the Justice Department to break up media monopolies and require all FCC license holders to provide free airtime to candidates for federal office. He mentions "public airwaves" and the Federal Communications Act of 1934, which set specific responsibilities for broadcast license holders to serve "in the public interest, convenience and necessity." He also says that, as president, he would appropriate more money for public TV and radio. He is against prosecutions for file sharing, embraces open source and Lessig's Creative Commons initiative and is critical of restrictive "proprietary" licenses. He also is very outspoken on the digital divide and privacy issues related to the Internet, saying that the Patriot Act is "not reflective of Jeffersonian Democracy. This is Kafka's *The Trial* writ large."

**JOSEPH LIEBERMAN** Lieberman represents the quintessential right wing of the Democratic Party and shows it regarding media. Lieberman labeled the FCC vote a "cause for concern" and pledged, "As president, I will watch carefully to see if these rules work to the detriment of the American people and, if they do, I will take necessary action." While he did vote for the resolution of disapproval in September, his defense of big business and free trade is well documented. He praises the "magic of the Internet" and wants to develop a national strategy and implement tax incentives to promote high-speed technology. He believes a key trade priority must be to prevent foreign piracy of U.S. intellectual property and has tried to stake a claim as the "high-tech candidate," garnering the endorsement of many high-tech executives. He supported the 1996 Telecommunications Act.



**AL SHARPTON** While short on policy positions, he is characteristically, though not necessarily consistently, outspoken about issues of diversity in the media and minority ownership and representation. In 2002 he spoke out against the proposed merger of EchoStar and Hughes satellite providers, and in 1999 he criticized the merger of Viacom and CBS, seeking assurances that minority money managers would be involved and minority entities would receive an appropriate amount of advertising dollars. His short-term, and ill-conceived, hook-up with Michael Jackson to decry record company profits fizzled but his dedication to ground-up activism will keep him in the debate, although, as he rightly points out, marginalized by mainstream media. ■

*Williams Cole is a contributing editor of the Brooklyn Rail and a former Fulbright scholar in media at the London School of Economics. He also is a documentary filmmaker currently producing a film about New York under Rudy Giuliani.*

## CONTACT THE CANDIDATES

**CAROL MOSELEY BRAUN** [www.carolforpresident.com](http://www.carolforpresident.com)  
**WESLEY CLARK** [www.clark04.com](http://www.clark04.com)  
**HOWARD DEAN** [www.deanforamerica.com](http://www.deanforamerica.com)

**JOHN EDWARDS** [www.johnedwards2004.com](http://www.johnedwards2004.com)  
**DICK GEPHARDT** [www.dickgephardt2004.com](http://www.dickgephardt2004.com)  
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**DENNIS KUCINICH** [www.kucinich.us](http://www.kucinich.us)  
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## What do we need?



CYNTHIA MOOTHART

# No Brass Check Journalists

BY STUDS TERKEL

Upton Sinclair self-published a book called *The Brass Check* in 1919, 13 years after *The Jungle*. The brass check was the coin used in whorehouses. The customer went up to see the madam and he would pay his two bucks—this was long before inflation—and receive a brass check, which he would give to the girl.

And at the end of the day the girl would cash in all her brass checks and get half a buck apiece. So Upton Sinclair took the brass check, and made it a reference to the

press in those days. The journalists were pretty much brass check artists, they were like the girls in the brothel. And how much of that has changed in the past century?

Think about the coverage of George Bush, especially after 9/11, when David Broder, a solid, centrist journalist, compared Bush to Abraham Lincoln. That gives you an idea of the nonsense we have to deal with these days. We're not talking now about the right-wing pundits, of whom nothing much need be said, we're talking about journalists like Broder who are considered part of the "liberal media," which is of course an obscene phrase because of the burlesque nature of it. Another horrendous example of the media and its cravenness was the lack of attention paid to Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) in September 2002. Here we had a conservative Democratic senator making

one of the most eloquent addresses attacking the U.S.A. PATRIOT Act and the Bush administration for endangering our civil liberties, and for violating the constitution. It was a fantastic speech. You would have thought it would make headlines. Here was the dean of the Senate speaking about dangers to our fundamental rights. And the fact that it got so little reportage says more than you want to know about the media.

The other aspect of media today is its triviality. Trivia and political thought have become one. We have a new Teflon girl, Oprah Winfrey, who had Arnold Schwarzenegger on as a guest while he was a candidate for governor. It was a kiss-kiss hour. I don't know how many millions of women watch her program, but it seems that she would at least have his leading opponent, Cruz Bustamante, on. But no one questioned the idea of Oprah having Schwarzenegger on as a guest in the midst of a campaign without any rebuttal. This was a farce that could be designed only by W. C. Fields—a recall election and the leading candidate being a muscle-headed muscle-man actor. It seems to me that trivia and hype and style have taken over debate.

At the same time I am not going to be overwhelmingly pessimistic. There is reason for optimism.

*Hope Dies Last* (the name of my new book) is a phrase used by Jessie de la Cruz, who worked very closely with Cesar Chavez organizing the farm workers. She said that whenever times were bleak, they had a phrase, “la esperanza muere última—hope dies last.” Because what is the alternative? Despair. And with despair, all that is left is the head in the oven, or about 20 sleeping pills and a couple of martinis—or in my case a dozen martinis.

Hope has always been the hallmark of dissenters. We know something happened on September 11, 2001, but there is another day—February 15, 2003—what I call “almost liberation day,” when 10 million people across the world acting for peace attended protests against Bush's preemptive strike at Iraq. That hope continues as an undercurrent in the many, many community groups. The issue could be the environment as well as peace, or civil liberties under John Ashcroft. The question is: Can it be made active?

I must make a confession here. I am a fellow alumnus of John Ashcroft; we both

attended the University of Chicago Law School. I was there about 30 years before he was, but he is much older than I am. I maintain John Ashcroft is at least 300 years old, because he is simply the reincarnation of the Reverend Samuel Parris we saw in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. The subject was witchcraft. We were as afraid of witchcraft then as we are of terrorists today. Reverend Parris came into Salem, as the chief prosecutorial officer, like Ashcroft is now. He pointed to the young hysterical girls and said you are not with me if you challenge me, you are consorting with the devil—with evil.

Fantasy is at work here. Miller's play is at work here. W.C. Field's scenario is at work here. And over and above it all is this question: What's to be done?

One of the things that keeps people from doing what they know they should do for their own good is the national Alzheimer's disease. There is no memory of the past. There is no yesterday. There

president. But he has as much chance of being nominated as the Chicago Bears do of winning the Super Bowl. He has no money and he is not known. It comes to hype again. One out of 100 people know his name.

Name recognition is what he needs, so that the Democratic Leadership Council, a toady group that has steadily moved the party to the right, will be forced to give him time on the platform at the Democratic Party Convention; multi-millions would then be aware of his presence and his significance.

I suppose the best of the lot, if it is not Dennis Kucinich, would be Howard Dean, because he is at least challenging the Democratic Leadership Council, which is of course the albatross that is somehow still at the rudder of that sinking ship. Had the Democratic Party true leadership, Kucinich would be the candidate. And, of course, if he were nominated, he would win. In a

## **What's to be done is to act. To act is to do, to do is to cast your ballot and to do is also to ask: Who is representing what?**

was no Depression. There was no New Deal. There is no memory that when the free market, which is our religion, fell on its fanny, the free marketeers—I call them free buccaneers—pleaded with the government, “Please help us out. Please save us.” And of course the New Deal and regulation did. Now the sons and grandsons and daughters and granddaughters of those whose asses were saved by the New Deal, by big government, are the ones who most condemn big government today. And they are getting away with it, because of the media.

The key is not simply to dissent, but to turn the country around. What's to be done is to act. To act is to do, to do is to cast your ballot, and to do is also to ask: Who is representing what? Which leads to the Democratic primary race.

Of course my candidate, Dennis Kucinich, who I knew as the boy mayor of Cleveland, is the ideal candidate for

debate with Bush there would be a knockout in the first round, there would be no competition. And this is the perfect time for that, except for the role of the media.

Fortunately, we have an alternative press. The effect of the alternative press is seemingly minor, but it has a ripple-in-the-water effect. You can tell that by reading the letters to the editor in the *Chicago Tribune*—my barometer of what the public is thinking. But aside from alternative journals like *In These Times* and Bill Moyers and humorist Jon Stewart on television, Upton Sinclair's brass checks are alive and well today.

Now is the time to act, and, thus, become what we were born to be—thinking, active citizens of a democratic society. ■

# Cracking the Media Walls

BY NORMAN SOLOMON

The major news outlets are like walls with cracks. The confining structures of big media loom large every day—yet progressives have countless opportunities to find, utilize and widen the cracks in the corporate media's barriers to democratic communication.

Steadily worsening concentrations of ownership and the hefty clout of advertising combine to severely limit the range of information and debate in news media. Ongoing pressures—economic, ideological and governmental—constrain the work of mainline journalists, whose efforts routinely suffer from skewed priorities and self-censorship. A profit-driven ideology of the “free market” is in sync with the agendas of top management and advertisers.

In recent years, progressive media projects have gained momentum. But the tilt against truly independent media and wide-ranging discourse is extreme in the United States. While no individual or single organization can take on more than a fraction of the necessary endeavors, the overall work to create a democratic media environment must run a gamut.

Sustained challenges to the corporate media and support for alternative media outlets can reinforce each other with continuous synergy—to establish, sustain and expand progressive media organizations; to spread deft criticism of rancid mass media; to push for better reporting and much wider debate in mainstream media; to fight for structural reform of agencies like the FCC; to lambast, debunk and satirize the insidious junk that so often passes for journalism and cultural uplift.

The horrendous media problems are multifaceted. Our solutions must be, as well.

In the long run, no campaign for basic media reform can succeed apart from a broader progressive movement—and vice versa. The degradation of journalism and mass entertainment is entwined with pervasive corporate power that chokes virtually every facet of this country's political and social life.

Media criticism becomes profoundly useful in combination with media activism. Too often we've held onto theories about what is and is not possible. But analysis and action become much more powerful when they constantly inform each other—when assessments shift because of on-the-ground experiences that benefit not only from the results of trial and error but from insightful up-to-date analysis.

## Securing stable funding

Along with theory and practice that keep enhancing each other, we need a lot more resources for the media tasks ahead. Many left-leaning foundations remain hesitant or unwilling to fund media work, and the ones that do often are leery of backing media endeavors that seem overly combative or ideological. Not so the right-wing foundations and corporations that sink millions of dollars a week

into aggressive media-savvy propaganda outfits like the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and the Manhattan Institute. Likewise, intensely ideological media organs like the Murdoch-owned *Weekly Standard* magazine are able to gain national prominence and maintain influence thanks to large subsidies from right-wing backers.

As a fundamental matter of social-change strategy, progressive media institutions—including groups that focus on improving mainstream media coverage as well as on building radio, TV, video, print and Internet projects—merit support to narrow the gaps between their skimpy resources and the huge budgets for right-wing media. This is especially important because the left has to navigate media terrain that's appreciably less hospitable.

## Echoing one another

One of the political right's key advantages is the mass-media echo chamber. Many a spun story and loopy canard bounces around the walls among outlets like the *Washington Times*, Rush Limbaugh's radio show, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, the *Weekly Standard* and Fox News. Frequently, from there, the dubious stories and simple-minded polemics flood into mainstream talk shows, daily papers, slick magazines, broadcast news outlets and cable TV networks.

Progressives have nothing comparable in terms of nationwide echo chambers. And the disparity often makes a pivotal difference. It's not nearly enough to put out a powerful exposé or release a cogent analysis in a few print outlets or on some Web sites or on a few dozen radio stations—or to briefly surface in a large national media venue. Such achievements, while important, are insufficient.



They need to draw strength from each other—utilizing the best material available across the progressive board—while simultaneously finding ways to reach broader audiences, including via mass media, where cracks in the corporate walls beckon.

During the last few years, progressive advocates and independent journalists have learned a lot about how to realize “multiplier effects” among a wide array of media. When astute strategizing and cooperation flourish, we’re finding ways to reach many people—sometimes millions or tens of millions—with information and analysis that otherwise would be confined to a relative few. The potential for further developing such productive media synergy is enormous.

In the process, what’s needed is to strengthen the many progressive media organizations that have been developing skills, infrastructures and cooperative spirit and to grasp what is clearly possible—mutually supportive operations that cross-pollinate across extensive media terrain and propagate resistance to the status quo’s deadening and often deadly corporate priorities.

### Spreading the burden

While regularly affecting the content of major media outlets, the progressive media movement needs counter-institutions that can inspire and sustain many people for the challenges ahead. No one media project is a potential solution by itself. No silver bullets need apply. At the same time, progressive funders ought to provide long-term support for an array of media work. By now, there are enough track records out there to supply empirical evidence of impressive results.

We urgently need to boost the resources and improve the coordination of progressive media work. Sure, by definition, corporate media and their allies inevitably have big bucks that dwarf the outlays of anti-corporate crusaders. Extreme imbalances in funding come with the media territory. But in his fabled confrontation with Goliath, even David needed a slingshot. Long-term progressive media projects of all descriptions need at

least minimal resources along with savvy strategies to put up a strong fight and make appreciable headway.

Meanwhile, our guiding ethos should be notably different than the right wing’s preferred mode of top-down centralism. It should be possible for progressives to attain the creative advantages of sharp analysis, institutional growth, coordinated planning and agile cooperation while encouraging a decentralized, democratic, grassroots approach to social action.

### Hanging together

Along the way, we should resist temptations to rely on a few left heroes on the mass-media battlefields. In the mid-1990s, while working on the launch of the Institute for Public Accuracy as a national consortium to get progressive voices into media, I received some advice to concentrate on grooming a few “superstars” to become regulars on national television. But the Institute opted for a different approach: to develop a roster of many hundreds of policy analysts—including researchers, authors and other experts from academia, public-interest groups and grassroots organiza-

tions—representing a deep reservoir of knowledge and insights that routinely go untapped in the mass media.

This approach doesn’t just move forward a few individuals and organizations; it widens the bounds of media discussion on a regular basis, not merely on occasion. Media outreach that successfully reflects the breadth and depth of progressive constituencies is more effective at being persuasive—and more capable of withstanding the right wing’s demonizations of a few individuals or accusations of elitism.

A process already underway places scores of different progressives on national television each season, along with hundreds of appearances on a variety of radio programs. Best of all, many of those analysts remain in producer Rolodexes, so their voices will be heard again and again. Clearly, a lot more can be accomplished to move progressive advocates into mainstream media on a regular basis.

Overall, what’s needed in our society—and what a progressive media movement should strive for—is a kind of media ecology that recognizes and promotes authentic diversity. This diversity holds great promise: not because of any mechanistic or PC concepts but because tremendous human capacities and insights, routinely excluded from major media, are always present in the United States and the rest of the world.

Right now the cracks in the media walls are much too thin and much too scarce. The long haul of our struggle involves bringing down the institutional barriers that, in effect, soundproof much of the media world and muffle the First Amendment in the process. We can chip away at those walls and replace them with vibrant democratic discourse. ■

Norman Solomon is founder and executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His latest book, co-authored with foreign correspondent Reese Erlich, is *Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn’t Tell You* (Context Books, 2003).



What do we need?

# Supporting Young Thinkers

BY MISCHA GAUS

Right-wing foundations understand how to create dedicated ideologues. They target budding freshmen conservatives from their move-in day and support their progeny up through—and beyond—their TV talking-head appearances.

"They teach them how to frame arguments in ways that serve their political purposes," says Jeremy Smith, founder of the Independent Press Association's Campus Alternative Journalism Project (CAJP). This project seeks to provide progressives the same kind of strategic success that conservative groups, which created right-wing campus media, have enjoyed. But for progressives, says Smith, "it is not simply propagandizing but creating a culture of dissidence and criticism."

Marlena Gangi, editor of Portland State University's *Rearguard*, agrees. "That's what's different about us," she says. "We're not just writing about it, we're out there in the streets. ... If you are passionate and consistent enough, you can get the word out."

While conservative groups like the Collegiate Network pour nearly \$1 million a year into starting and sustaining right-wing campus publications, lefty college 'zines struggle on without thousands of foundation dollars.

Roughly half of these scrappy publications survive on student-fee money, making them easy targets for conservative campus groups that attack by taking over student finance committees or pressuring administrators to stop funding political speech. The rest scrape by with garage sales, benefit concerts, even their own cash: not an easy path for a publication's longevity—or participants' morale.

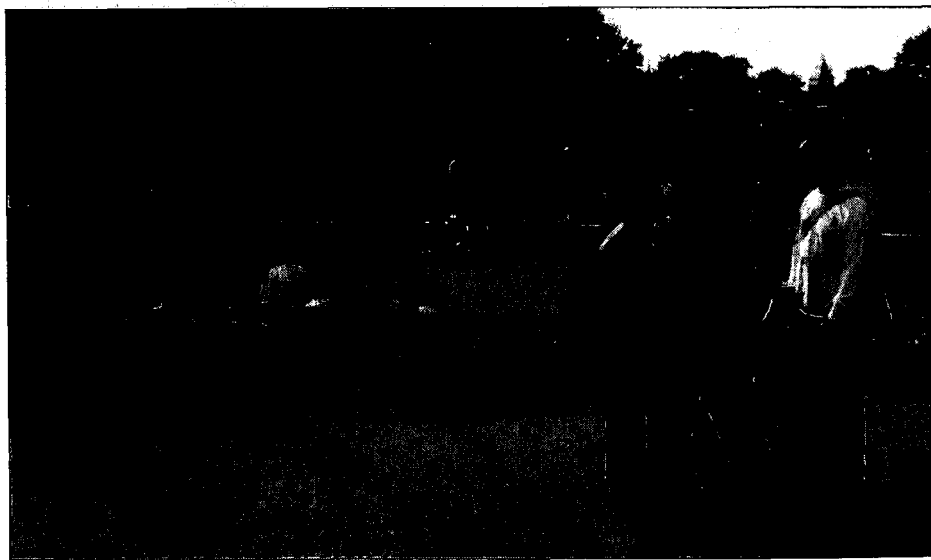
But the biggest challenge for campus

publications is student turnover. This is an issue for conservative papers, too, but their strong infrastructure maintains the quality of their papers over time. The

to run their publications more professionally. The group also runs a Campus Alternative Journalism Awards program to raise awareness of high-quality work.

"The hard part is motivating people to see [the paper] as a place to do serious, analytical work, and convince them not just to give in and watch Fox TV," says Kate Sheppard, managing editor of *Buzzsaw Haircut*, Ithaca College's alternative paper. Gangi says juggling school, jobs, activism and deadlines also is tough for her writers.

Campus publications and support net-



Without consistent funding progressive student publications struggle.

CAJP is trying to find funds to hold conferences and training sessions to help progressive campus publications improve standards and tactics, thereby increasing credibility and consistency. "A lot of them are operating in this vacuum, making it up as they go along," Smith says. The group hopes to fill that void with practical resources to teach campus journalists how

works like CAJP need philanthropic support because other sources are too unstable, yet foundations provide few funds to continually infuse progressive media with fresh blood. Such funding for radical campus publications is complicated, moreover, because tax-exempt nonprofits are not allowed to fund strictly political work, despite conservatives'

obvious flouting of the law.

"Do we cheat, too, or do we forever consign ourselves to losing the discourse debate?" asks Rob Levine, editor of *mediatransparency.org*.

The funding crisis in lefty campus publications mirrors the perennial poverty of their older siblings, like *The Progressive*, *The Nation*, *Bitch* and *Z Magazine*. Experience and a deepened commitment to progressive media could be fostered through apprenticeships. Most left-wing publications offer internships, but very

few have sufficient funds to pay interns even a modest wage, let alone provide fellowships. This further limits structured opportunities for emerging writers who can't afford to work for free.

"We can't afford it," says *Bitch* publisher Lisa Jarvis. "I wish we could, but there's a lot of things I wish about our budget."

Progressive policy think tanks also offer fewer and less lucrative research opportunities than their conservative counterparts. The Heritage Foundation,

by contrast, offers 50 paid internships each summer.

Consequently, would-be deep thinkers are forced to work in other fields, the left's idea pipeline leaks, and fewer smart composers are trained to counter Washington's one-note tunes. ■

Mischa Gaus is a freelance writer based in Chicago.

## PROFILE

# WW3 Illustrated

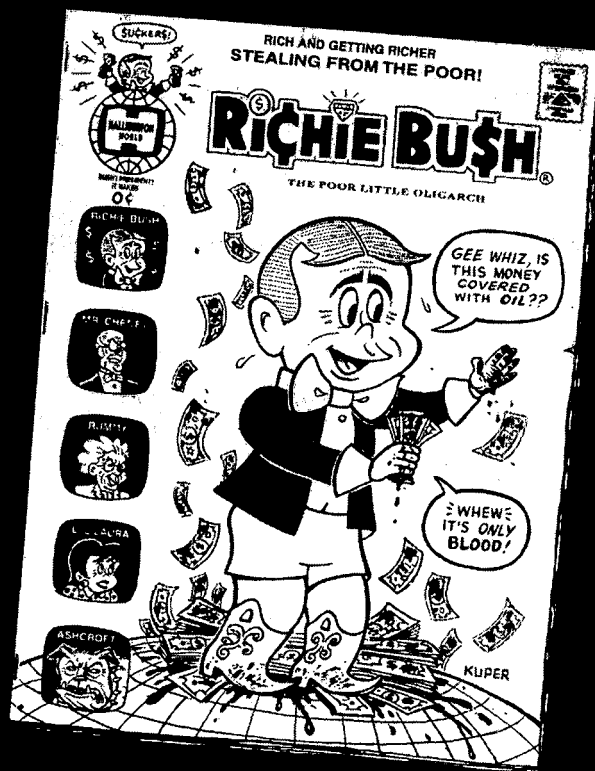
The startling cinematic success of *American Splendor*—an indie film uniquely merging the real-story-behind-the-film-story with the comic drawings that stand between the two—has kicked the familiar dilemma of the vernacular American artist up to new levels.

Over most of the planet, adults as well as children love comics, read them throughout life, and regard a considerable dimension of the output as "Art." Not in the United States, at least not until Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* and the author's Pulitzer Prize (Ben Katchor's MacArthur award added fuel to the fire). The publishing industry has only belatedly developed commercial interest in what has come to be called the "graphic story" (not quite as misleading as "comic," to describe non-humorous material). And here comes *World War 3 Illustrated*, a political-artistic wallop

at the System.

Actually, the WW3 project has been around for 20 years, annual volumes more or less self-published by a collection of youngish artists, anthologized occasionally (as *Confrontational Comics* by Four Walls, Eight Windows in 1995). But the political situation and the growing sense that a new art is aborning has turned a corner. *World War 3 Illustrated: Taking Liberties*, just off the press, has Spiegelman inside the front cover, Sue Coe close at hand, Tom Tomorrow delivering his usual jabs, and more than a dozen others, young and middle aged, including co-founder Peter Kuper (who draws the "Spy vs Spy" for the current *Mad Magazine*, and whose "Richie Bush," a splendid takeoff on Richie Rich, is one of the hard-hitting highlights).

What we have here, in historical terms, is a recuperation



of the 1910s *Masses* magazine's Ash Can artists interacting with another war threat (the approach of the World War I, during which the magazine was suppressed) and a social promise (something of Greenwich Village and the Industrial Workers of the

World). Offering a wide variety of artistic approaches, WW3 artists offer realistically and surrealistically enticing views of the horrors in front of us, the struggles to turn things around—and how stupid our leaders really look.

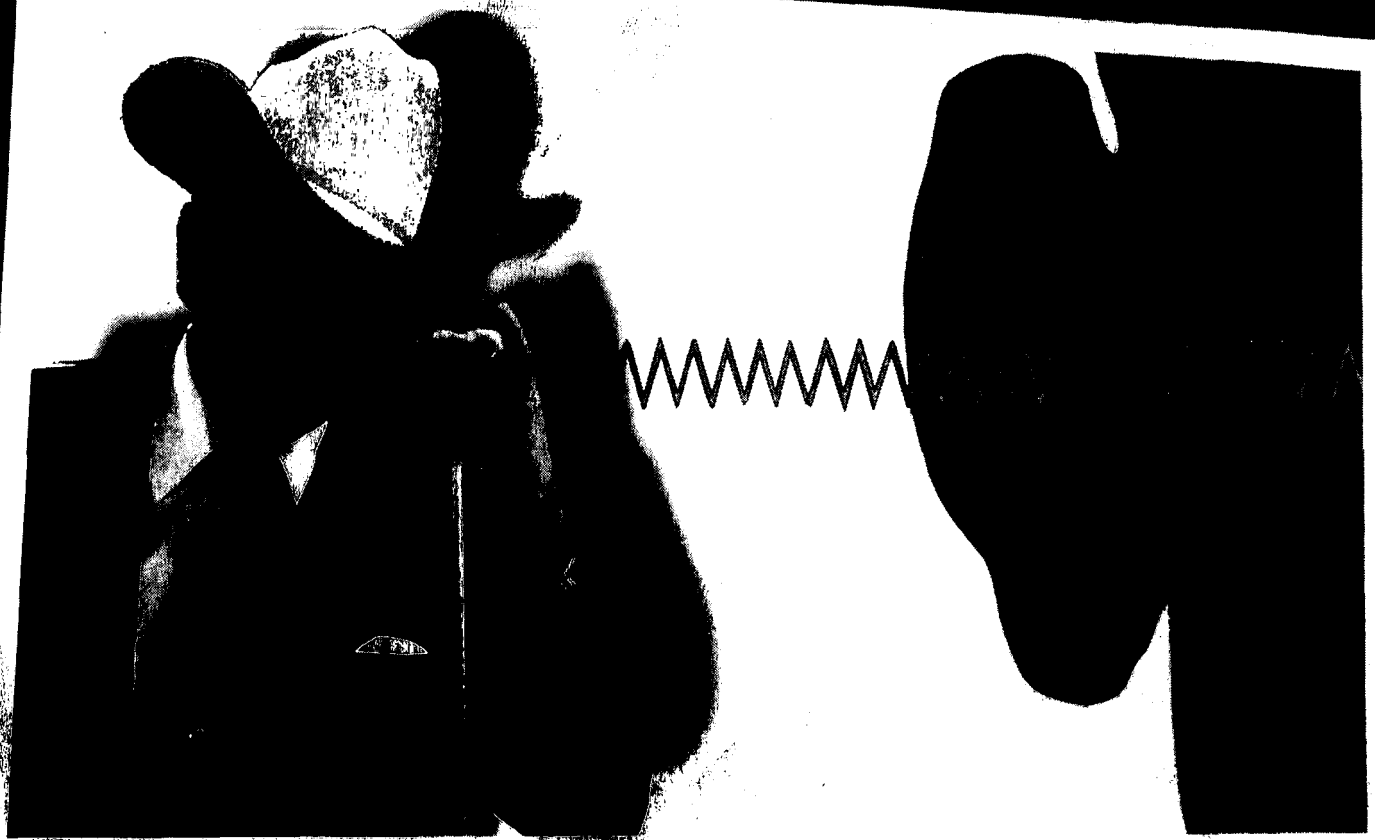
—Paul Buhle

Paul Buhle is co-author with Dave Wagner of *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002* (Paul Graves-St. Martin's, 2003) and the upcoming *Blacklisted: The Film Lover's Guide to the Hollywood Blacklist* (Paul Graves-St. Martin's). He is working on a comic book version of the history of the Industrial Workers of the World.



Speak simply, carry a big  
schtick and get tech-savvy

## What can we learn?



# A Language for Change

BY DAVID KUSNET

When Ronald Reagan accepted the Republican presidential nomination in 1980, he called for “a new consensus with all those across the land who share a community of values embodied in these words: family, work, neighborhood, peace and freedom.”

Twelve years later in his acceptance speech, Democrat Bill Clinton invoked a similar set of values—“opportunity, responsibility and community”—that were watchwords of his successful presidential campaign.

Reagan and Clinton spoke everyday language that evoked moral values, not

public policies. They were elected and re-elected against opponents who tended to speak the language of government and politics, not normal life. Not surprisingly, “speaking American” beats speaking-Bureaucratese.

In recent political campaigns and public debates, conservatives have spoken

American more often than progressives. Remember Arnold Schwarzenegger vs. Gray Davis, George W. Bush vs. Al Gore, and Rudy Giuliani vs. various New York City Democrats? The more conservative candidates sounded more like the regular people their policies injure or ignore.

So how can progressives speak American, too?

First, speak the language of everyday experience. If you’re advocating an increase in the minimum wage or opposing a trade agreement that could cost American jobs, explain what it all means for a single mom struggling to support her kids on her paychecks.

Second, ask yourself what values are at stake—and talk about those values. If you’re supporting a living-wage ordinance,

## RESOURCES FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

- Robert Reich's *Tales of a New America* (Times Books, 1987) presents several populist parables, such as "rot at the top."
- In its September 2003 issue, titled "How the Republicans Hijack Language," *The American Prospect* ([www.prospect.org/print/V14-8.html](http://www.prospect.org/print/V14-8.html)) explores why conservatives have out argued their adversaries
- The Institute for America's Future publishes *Straight Talk*, a biennial guide to presenting progressive positions on public issues ([www.ourfuture.org/projects/straight\\_talk/index.cfm](http://www.ourfuture.org/projects/straight_talk/index.cfm)).

then the issue is the moral value the community places on hard work. If it's government contracts for companies that break unions, then the issues include individual Americans' rights to free speech and freedom of association. And if it's exorbitant salaries or corrupt practices by corporate executives, then the issue is responsibility, especially the ancient truth that much is expected from those to whom much has been given. Whatever the issue, an argument that appeals to commonly held morality is more persuasive than one that's purely technical.

Third, speak in parables—familiar stories that illustrate and inform peoples' ideas of what is right and wrong. Progressive parables include:

### Rot at the top

The classic populist parable holds that those with the most power and privilege—Washington muck-a-mucks, multimillionaire CEOs, and others with wealth and influence—have betrayed the larger community. Corporate wrongdoing at Enron and WorldCom—and practices that are legal but harmful, such as moving operations offshore to escape taxes in this country—call to mind "rot at the top," a phrase popularized by former Labor Secretary Robert Reich in the '80s. As does self-serving or misleading behavior by government officials or leaders from any other sector of society.

### Virtue unrewarded

The flip side of unpunished wrongdoing by big shots is unrewarded responsibility by regular people. When Bill Clinton talked about people "who work hard and play by the rules," he appealed to the widely held belief that people who work hard, pay their taxes, live within the law, and do right by their community are not getting the respect and rewards they have earned. That's why the working poor, the middle-class taxpayer and the responsible

businessperson all are sympathetic figures. And that's why slogans like "Make work pay" win wider support for living-wage ordinances, union organizing drives and programs that help people move from welfare to employment.

### The caring community

Americans believe in helping each other and sharing life's benefits and burdens. For all our individualism, most of us don't believe that people make it on their own; we know we need a community behind us. In difficult times, such as the post-9/11 world, Americans want every-

ments, whether of the left, right or center, have cast their causes as something larger than the redress of specific grievances. Instead, they have declared that the future of democracy itself is at stake. Thus, these movements themselves become models of democracy, with tax rebels recalling the Boston Tea Party and the Civil Rights movement adopting the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence.

Today's progressives would do well to reconnect with the small-d democratic rhetoric of the labor movement of the '30s and the Civil Rights movement of the '60s. Speaking American is one reason former Vermont Governor Howard Dean is running so strong a race for the Democratic presidential nomination, reaching well beyond the affluent liberals who were his initial base. In his formal announcement of his presidential candidacy and a recent speech in Boston, Dean placed his insurgency in that larger historic context. Using the litany "You have

## Successful movements cast their causes as something larger than the redress of specific grievances.

one to contribute, especially those with the most advantages. Progressives can use rhetorical jiu-jitsu against President Bush: If the nation really is besieged, then how can we justify new benefits for the wealthy and new burdens on the rest of us?

### The people rising

Our nation's primal parable is the American Revolution: the people rising, peaceably at first, to demand the right to govern themselves. From the tax rebellions of the '70s and '80s to the recent recall initiative in California, conservatives have presented themselves as modern-day Minutemen. But so did progressives during the '60s and '70s, particularly in the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement and the peace movement. All these successful move-

the power," he has urged Americans to reclaim their democracy from wealthy special interests and secretive preemptive warriors.

Speaking everyday language, appealing to common values and developing populist parables—that's how progressives can communicate to our fellow citizens, not just each other, and persuade all Americans to follow their best instincts and further their best interests. ■

*David Kusnet was chief speechwriter for former President Bill Clinton from 1992 through 1994. He is the author of Speaking American: How the Democrats Can Win in the Nineties (Thunder's Mouth, 1992).*

# Lessons from the Idiot Box

BY CYNTHIA MOOTHART

With its talking turd and adolescent T&A it's easy to dismiss Comedy Central as a joke. But then 11 o'clock ET rolls around, and the upstart basic cable network presents the sharpest 22 minutes of news on TV.

Its own cheeky hype insists, "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" is the most important television show ever, with the most important guests, hosts and news ... of all time," while its host anchors a self-described fake news program and plays straight man to the day's events.

The show is embedded in such contradiction. Consider:

In mid-September, U.S. Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) formally announced his bid for presidency while talking via satellite with Stewart. That same week Stewart interviewed former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright about her new memoir—the night before she appeared on NPR.

"The Daily Show" won two Emmys for comedy days later and just months after the Television Critics Association nominated it for Outstanding Achievement in News and Information alongside David Bloom, "Frontline," "Nightline" and "60 Minutes." (Resist the temptation to disregard TV critics as mere fans; the show also won a prestigious Peabody Award for its election coverage in 2000.)

While interviewing Stewart this summer on "NOW with Bill Moyers," the veteran newsman confessed, "I do not know whether you are practicing an old form of parody and satire ... or a new form of journalism." Moyers later added: "When I report the news on this broadcast, people say I'm making it up. When you make it up, they say you're telling the truth."

But there's a greater contradiction worth noting: This seemingly agnostic show provides lessons for progressives, in and outside the media, on how to speak with, produce news for and activate the electorate.

As Stewart might say, "Whaaaa?"

The million-plus nightly viewers who tune into "The Daily Show" are college-educated thirtysomethings with salaries that exceed the national norm and skew male, 62 percent to 38 percent. The show continues to build audience within this key demographic, says Steve Albani, a Comedy Central spokesman, because it's relevant and irreverent.

"It's one of the few shows out there that can truly speak its mind on current issues," he says. "We often see a spike in viewers after major events; they want to know Jon's take on what they just saw. With 24-hour programs there's an increasing goal of getting news out there fast—oftentimes the news is put out before it's been confirmed or analyzed. 'The Daily Show' peels away layers to see what's at the core. It doesn't go for the easy joke. It goes for the joke that makes you laugh and makes you think at the same time."

Building audience, speaking our minds, lampooning conventions: All are key as progressives seek to recapture the public's imagination this election cycle.

## Building audience

"People often begin to see their favorite TV personalities as 'real,' and develop

parasocial relationships with them. The phenomenon of Rush Limbaugh is a great case in point," says Robbin Crabtree, chair of the Department of Communication at Fairfield University. "A huge number of people see Rush as an opinion leader, as someone 'in their lives' whom they trust and on whom they rely, perhaps even as a friend. For liberals, especially but not only, Jon becomes our friend, a sane voice in a cacophony of conservative, uncritical, acquiescent media. We the mass audience don't know Jon, we don't know the nuances and complexities of his own political opinions. But his character on TV becomes part of our cadre of real political allies."

Although he doubts that a "Daily Show" approach could galvanize the left, Mark Andrejevic, with the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, agrees that the right has been more effective in coalescing and activating its base through media efforts.

"The left has nothing to identify with in that way," he says. "Creating the possibility of shared identity might be a good starting point for organizing collective political participation."

As progressives develop a media strategy, Andrejevic suggests we take a lesson from Stewart: "I think it could help to combine values with smartness and humor," he says. "Maybe there's something beneficial in changing the left's image from an ineffectual sincerity to a hipper, smarter but still committed approach to left politics."

## Speaking our minds

While he certainly seems progressive, Stewart demurred in a *New Yorker* article last year by Tad Friend: "My comedy is not the comedy of the neurotic. It comes from the center. But it comes from feeling dis-



placed from society because you're in the center. We're the group of fairness, common sense and moderation. ... The disenfranchised center is upset that the extremes control the agenda."

Indeed, much of the show gains its humor from the disconnect between common and political speech. Recall Stewart's riff on presidential hopeful Howard Dean's first commercial, which closed with the candidate saying, "That's why I'm running for president. And that's why I approved this message." Stewart: "That's why I approved this message?! All right! A can-do guy who's in charge of the things that come out of his own mouth!" (To be fair, Dean's tagline was a way of complying with campaign finance laws.)

Engaging that amorphous middle, to which a majority of Americans say they relate, requires that we speak a common language. In recent years the right has excelled at bumper-sticker rhetoric—"family values," "healthy forests," "compassionate conservatism"—that lacks nuance and disguises corrupt policies but is memorable and plays into the routines of the mass media, through which a majority of Americans get their political news.

"For the left, coming off as rhetorical is deadly," says Norman Solomon, executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. "Wooden language and buzzwords are apt to seem detached from people's actual experiences and concerns. We shouldn't squander a moment with the kind of snoozy, wonky talk that's so common in what passes for political discourse. Part of the solution is to 'be here now'—genuinely addressing concerns about the present and the future in down-to-earth ways. Usually, people respond favorably to irreverence that has a point."

### Lampooning conventions

"The Daily Show" is at its best and most biting when it lampoons the media



SCOTT GRIS / GETTY

**Jon in 2004?** On October 8 Stewart asked Hillary Rodham Clinton if a certain someone might run for president. She suggested that his chances were pretty good.

conventions upon which it's built—objectivity, sourcing and experts all fracture under this scrutiny.

"By mocking and satirizing news, 'The Daily Show' draws our attention to media routines," Crabtree says. "They are interpreting news for comic effect, but there's a lot to laugh at if we're critically engaged. It's the most serious news on television. It's the only place you're going to see a critical interrogation of the administration."

In much the same way, progressives would do well to, if not lampoon, at least reconsider their conventions. Unlike the Christian Right, which routinely updates its narratives and strategies, the left seems trapped in timeworn rhetoric and routines. With activists and a constituency embodying enormous creativity and strength, progressives should be able to retire the hackneyed "Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho ..." and other stale mobilization conventions.

But taking too many cues from a comedy show has drawbacks.

"The downside of the program and others like it is the emphasis on humor; the importance of an issue might be obscured," says Christopher Sharrett, communications professor at Seton Hall

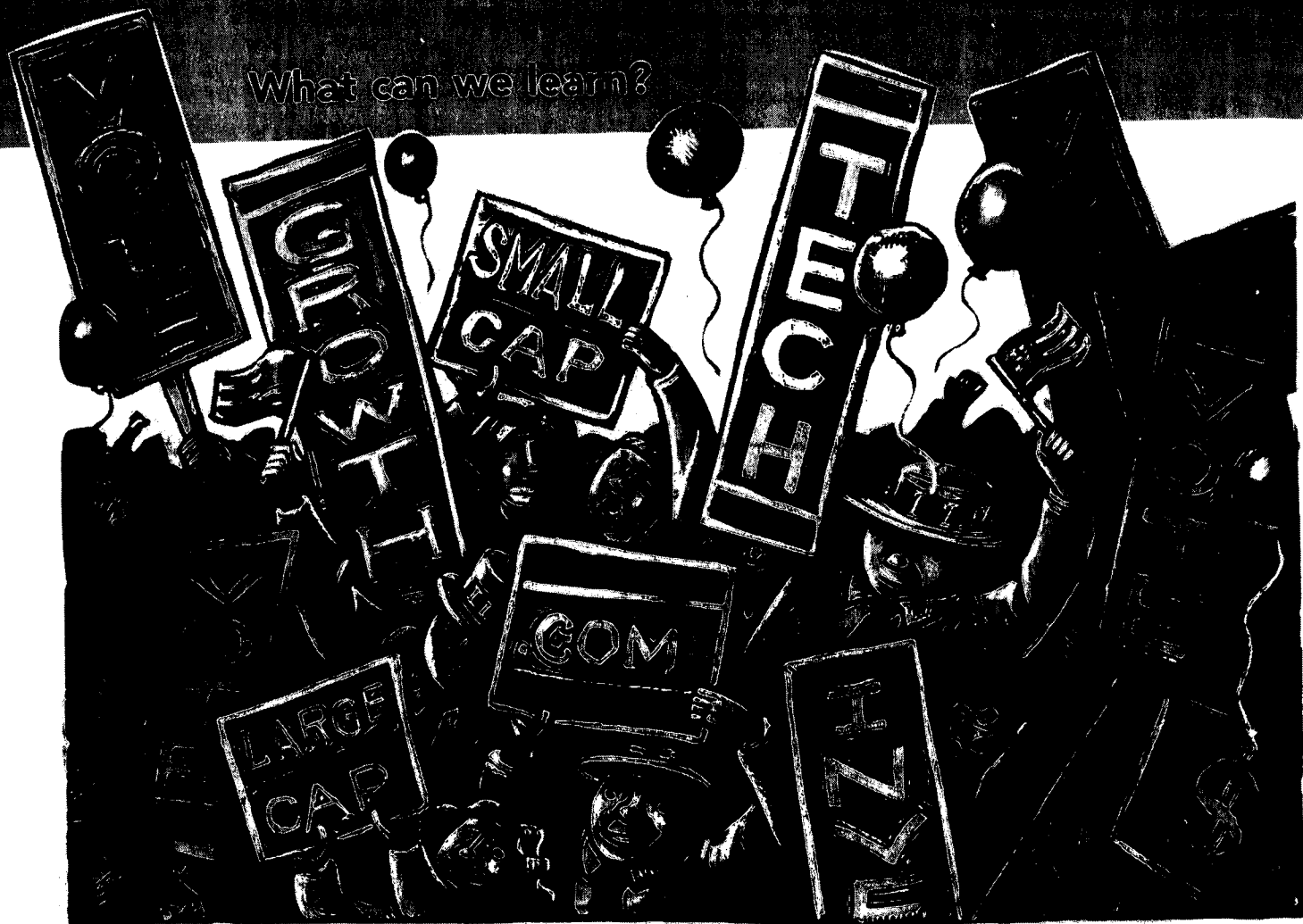
University. "Where topics of serious discourse become conflated with entertainment there's a trivializing of issues. 'The Daily Show' is within that realm. There are some interesting issues presented, but we're in a culture where information is increasingly presented within an entertainment format."

But that doesn't mean that as progressives we can't understand that this "fake" news program has an appeal we're ill advised to ignore. Last year on Larry King's CNN show Stewart put it this way: "We often hear that dissenting voices have not been heard since September 11. And that's been a criticism, that those voices have not been encouraged, but my feeling is that those voices haven't resonated."

So how can progressives make their views resonate?

"We need to be pithy, humorous, entertaining, but we ought to draw the line at personal invective," Solomon says. "We won't get lost in medialand if we stay true to the values of progressive populism, which include commitment to social equity and zest for pointing out how the corporate emperors have no clothes." ■

What can we learn?



# From the Screen to the Streets

BY HOWARD RHEINGOLD

It has taken 10 years of talk about “new media” for a critical mass to understand that every computer desktop, and now every pocket, is a worldwide printing press, broadcasting station, place of assembly, and organizing tool—and to learn how to use that infrastructure to affect change.

Previous technologies allowed users only to communicate one-to-one (telephones) or few-to-many (broadcast and print media). Mobile and deskbound media such as blogs, listservs and social networking sites allow for many-to-many communication. This provides opportunities and problems for progressive political activists in three key areas: Gathering and

disseminating alternative and more democratic news; creating virtual public spheres where citizens debate the issues that concern democratic societies; and organizing collective political action.

## The new news

Blogs and moblogs, such as the international network of Independent Media Cen-

ters, South Korea's influential OhMyNews and MoveOn.org's misleader.org are signs of what *San Jose Mercury-News* columnist Dan Gillmor calls an emerging “we journalism.” Each of these sites offers up-to-the-minute news alerts, provided by a combination of citizen-reporters and trained staff. While the owners and administrators of such sites range widely—from passionate individuals to collectives to upstart nonprofits—these blogs are markedly more democratic than their corporate-run, top-down brethren.

Internal and external forces, however, threaten to undermine “we journalism” before its impact is fully realized.

Misinformation, disinformation, incredulity and magical thinking all are problems on the supply side of these new reporting modes. Aggregators of blog post-

ings—which rank blog listings by popularity, similar to Google’s page rank technology—already serve as a filter for this flood of amateur journalism. And reputation systems, filters and syndication services also could develop into useful tools for assessing the veracity of information sites. But political activists and those who sponsor progressive projects also have a role: For “we journalism” to have long-term credibility and lasting impact, progressives must fund, staff and promote media literacy—teaching users to create and consume this new journalism.

Activists also have a role in turning back corporate attacks that seek to privatize the Internet by regulating content and limiting amateurs’ ability to produce cultural works that compete with media conglomerates.

Today, a small number of broadband Internet providers, such as Comcast and Viacom, are pushing for regulations that would enable them to pick and choose the content that travels over their part of the network. The courts also are coming to bear in this fight, as companies work to extend copyright far beyond its original intent and establish digital rights schemes that make it difficult to produce or distribute digital content not authorized by the entertainment industry.

The consolidation of media ownership in the hands of a small number of individuals or cartels—who exchange political funding for legislative and regulatory favors—is being fought by organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation. But activists who have not been involved in technology or media issues need to join in this battle, because communication media under dispute are profoundly political tools. In coming decades, Internet-based media will exert more and more influence over what people know and believe and how they can organize and assemble for collective action.

## The electronic town square

Network TV news and talk radio are hardly examples of the reasoned debate philosopher Jürgen Habermas had in mind when he described the public sphere as central to the life of a democracy. Indeed, they are an example of the manipulation of public opinion via popular media that he warned about.

Online and many-to-many technologies can shift the locus of the public sphere from a small number of powerful media owners to entire populations. The value of Internet discourse in this effort has not been proven, however, perhaps because the literacy around this use of media has not had sufficient time to mature—the World Wide Web is barely 10 years old, and has been gaining uninitiated users each year.

Now, for better and worse, citizens are arguing with each other—with varying degrees of civility—and sometimes marshaling evidence to buttress logic in countless blogs, listservs, chat rooms and message boards. The quality and level of know-how and the willingness of a significant portion of the population to adopt and self-enforce online etiquette will determine whether reasoned debate will flourish online or be drowned out by surlier forms of argument. Activists and journalists must take a lead-

ing role in determining the success of this outcome by wielding these technologies skillfully and purposively.

## Organizing collective action

Only recently have political activists successfully used many-to-many media to mobilize large-scale collective action such as street demonstrations and protests, electoral fundraising, get-out-the-vote campaigns and legislative lobbying. Technologies and methodologies are developing very rapidly at this point, and so are the political moves to neutralize them.

In the United States, Howard Dean’s presidential campaign has mobilized the self-organizing capabilities of blogs. Meetup.com and online fundraising propelled this underdog to front-runner status. If Dean wins, 2004 will be the watershed political event for the Internet that the Kennedy-Nixon debates were for television in 1960. In a few

## Many-to-many Media Glossary

**BLOGS** Web pages that are easy to update, change frequently and enable a kind of populist journalism

**MESSAGE BOARDS** Web sites that allow computer users to post and respond to messages over time

**SMS** Short, instant text messages sent from mobile telephone to mobile telephone

**MOBLOGS** Web sites that people update with text and photographs via mobile telephone

**SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES** Web sites that enable people who don’t know each other but share interests to meet

**REPUTATION SYSTEMS** Technology that allows users to rank online content according to criteria such as reliability, humorosity, etc.

**LISTSERVS** Automatic e-mail lists that enable group conversations

**SMART MOBS** Groups of people who use the Internet and mobile telephones to organize collective action

**SYNDICATION SERVICES** Projects that republish or disseminate news from one Web site to other sites

**CHAT ROOMS** Web sites that allow computer users to conduct real-time discussions

## LEARN MORE

- ▶ **Smart Mobs:** [www.smartmobs.com](http://www.smartmobs.com)
- ▶ **MoveOn.org meetup tool:** [action.moveon.org/meet](http://action.moveon.org/meet)
- ▶ **Howard Dean’s online community tools:** [www.deanspace.org](http://www.deanspace.org)
- ▶ **Network-Centric Advocacy:** [www.network-centricadvocacy.net](http://www.network-centricadvocacy.net)

Read this story online at [www.inthesetimes.com](http://www.inthesetimes.com) for more Web-based resources.



## What can we earn?

years, MoveOn.org also has grown from a Web site protesting the Clinton impeachment to an effective lobbying movement that influences legislation and elections. MoveOn.org played an important part in the recent effort to lobby Congress to overturn the FCC's deregulation of media cross-ownership.

Innovations aren't confined to the United States. Neither ex-President Estrada of the Philippines nor newly elected President Roh in South Korea would be in their present positions if smart mobs had not worked so effectively. In the Philippines, a million citizens used SMS to organize street demonstrations that helped topple the Estrada regime. In South Korea, the cyber-generation, seeing their favored candidate losing in exit polls, used a Web site to organize a get-out-the-vote campaign involving 800,000 personal e-mails and uncounted SMS messages, turning the tide in the election's final hours.

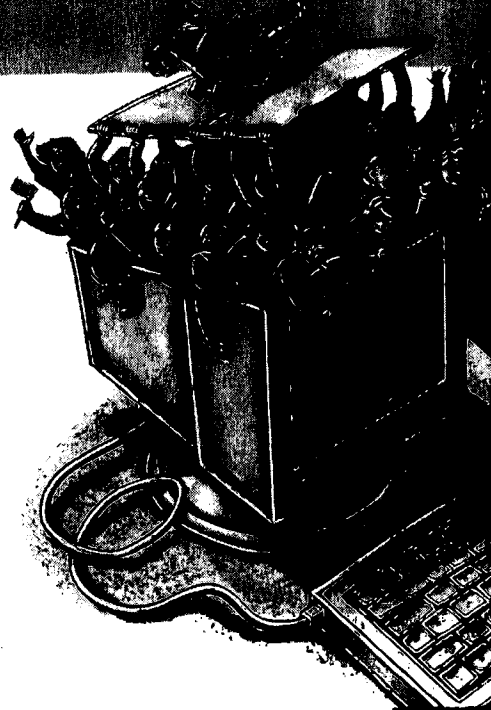
Activists should now concentrate their efforts in this last sphere—technology-

amplified collective action. The above examples are just the beginning. The capabilities of media are multiplying, the number of people who use their mobile phones as Internet connections and text-messaging media is growing explosively. And activists are only beginning to experiment with ways to multiply their ability to organize collective action.

Influencing elections and legislation is the sine qua non of effectiveness. In the next few years, peer-to-peer, self-organized, citizen-centric movements enabled by smart mob media will either demonstrate real political influence, be successfully contained by those whose power they threaten, or recede as a utopian myth of days gone by. What progressives know now, and what we do soon, will decide which of those scenarios unfolds. ■

**Howard Rheingold** ([www.rheingold.com](http://www.rheingold.com)) is the author of *Smart Mobs*, *The Virtual Community*, and *Tools for Thought*. He was also an editor of *The Whole Earth*

Review, *The Millennium Whole Earth Catalog* and *HotWired* and founded the online communities *Electric Minds* and *Brainstorms*.



## PROFILE

# Media Education Foundation

**S**ut Jhally believes the left faces two basic tasks: "The first is to understand and analyze the world better than anyone else," Jhally says, noting the influence of cultural theorist Stuart Hall. "And the second—and this is what the left has so often failed to do—is to translate that work to the world at large."

Few have accomplished both tasks with greater success than Jhally, a documentary filmmaker and communications professor at the University of Massachusetts. Jhally's first film, *Dreamworlds* (1991), a critical annihilation of the sexist and misogynist fantasy-

land of rock videos, garnered national attention when MTV sent the filmmaker a "cease and desist" order after he had distributed 100 copies to fellow educators. Jhally refused on the grounds of freedom of speech, and the subsequent negative publicity caused MTV to reconsider litigation. The film has since been viewed by 3 million students.

*Dreamworlds'* impact led Jhally to create the Media Education Foundation as a means to produce more films that engage a familiar mass media landscape by examining its underlying assumptions about race, gender, sexuality and unfettered consumerism.

In little more than a decade, MEF has become one of the largest producers of educational films and DVDs, with nearly 50 titles ranging from in depth examinations of advertising's image of women to taped lectures of marginalized scholars like Hall, George Gerbner and the late Edward Said.

Much of MEF's success comes from distributing its own films, which allows the organization to bypass a middleman and funnel those profits into future productions. But Jhally gives more credit to the simple fact that "we are producing films about issues that people desperately want to talk about." Equally vital is marketing the

films to forums where open debate still occurs. As Jhally notes, with civic space largely withered, "one of the few places where intellectual discussion is still allowed to take place is in the universities."

Still, MEF is seeking to expand to markets outside academia, such as independent movie houses, community centers and women's groups. "Marketing is a dirty word on the left, but to us, it's politics," Jhally explains. "If you're creating work that nobody sees, it's no longer politics. It's art."

For more information, go to [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).

—Brian Cook

Cut through data smog and  
don't be a twerp

What's next?



DAVID SILVERMAN

# Media Forecast is Hazy

BY PATRICIA AUFDERHEIDE

It's bad weather in the communications industry, and not just for progressive media makers. These days, most media people, even the big guys, feel buffeted by unpredictable and rapidly changing forces.

The tempestuous conditions are now decades old, and concentration of ownership in media is just one of the troubling features.

The media industry weather has been changing so fast, so unpredictably and so unrelentingly, in part, because of the

astounding implications of digital technology and the Internet. Never before have we had the capacity to make and distribute all kinds of media so easily to so many.

The weather also has been changing rapidly because of the unfolding implications of satellite technology, which vastly

reduced the cost of transmitting of everything from newspaper pages to wrestling matches. Satellites transformed the cable industry and are now transforming radio. And it has been changing because Federal Communications Commission regulators permitted many more TV and radio channels, and more phone and Internet services, even as they permitted owners to control more media in any given market.

## Pioneering projects

For progressives, there are inspiring examples of how to take advantage of these new possibilities. Some uses spring up out of the moment. The online activist

project MoveOn.org is certainly one good example, and so are the many ad hoc efforts of people worldwide to add left perspectives to debate over the Iraq war (check out [www.centerforsocialmedia.org](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org)'s "War Beyond the Box" for some funny and some sad examples).

And then there are planned-growth projects. Look at [www.oneworld.net](http://www.oneworld.net)—part journalism, part belief network, part public service. It calls itself "a network of people and groups working for human rights and sustainable development from across the globe."

Each of OneWorld's more than 1,500 affiliate nonprofit organizations is part of an international network they can draw on for trusted help and advice. The members also can contribute information to 12 offices that run Web sites worldwide. Professional editors at those offices digest partners' information and turn it into usable news that feeds a daily service; the editors also train partners in journalistic standards and technical procedures. OneWorld is now one of Yahoo's top four choices for world news, and is highly regarded at the United Nations.

The project also is pioneering software that permits interactive video, or "open documentaries." Films and videos about

Continued on page 40

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Labor, and Power  
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# THREADS

GENDER, LABOR, AND POWER  
 IN THE GLOBAL APPAREL INDUSTRY  
 JANE L. COLLINS

Threads is a collection of economic statistics, archival materials, and intelligent interviews with shop-floor workers, union activists, and CEOs, all woven together through account of this fashion industry's globalization.  
 —Micaela di Leonardo, Northwest

Instead of treating globalization as an abstract concept, Collins shows why it must be understood in its own access, shaped by management, state policies, and labor's responses. The book's common-sense insights about globalization and technology are as surprising as its insights into the North American fashion industry. By laying bare the underlying forces of globalization,

Threads makes a valuable contribution to discussions about globalization. University of Wisconsin-Madison  
 \$18.00

Available in bookstores  
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## ***New from Amsterdam University Press***

"Breman has enriched South Asian and Asian history with publications which are best described as history with a conscience."

—Tapan Raychaudhuri,  
Oxford University

These two volumes—one a scholarly investigation, the other a collection of photographs—chart the progressive disenfranchisement of textile workers and their families in the Indian city of Ahmedabad through the 1980s and 90s, elaborating dimensions of poverty often neglected in studies based on statistics alone. They also examine the significance of religious fault lines in the community, which exploded into riots in the spring of 2002. The crises of Ahmedabad, typical of the textile industry in India, can also be found in Asia at large, where a lack of social provisions can allow entire communities to sink below the poverty line. Breman and Shah give us as accurate and penetrating a portrait of this process as we could wish for.



### **Working in the Mill No More**

Jan Breman and Parthiv Shah

200 pages, illustrated throughout  
Cloth \$30.00

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*Sliding Down to the  
Bottom of the Labour  
Hierarchy in  
Ahmedabad, India*

Jan Breman

Cloth \$37.00

HIV/AIDS, climate change, Israel and Palestine, and other topics are excerpted into a sequence of one-minute bites. Viewers who have made or want to quote a video comment can easily insert an up-to-one minute segment anywhere along the thread. The software is simple enough for amateurs and easy for even antiquated computers to access. Thousands of organizations, from dozens of countries, have joined OneWorld's online TV community since its launch in 2002. A television editor both facilitates and moderates the site.

WITNESS, launched in 1992 and based in New York, offers another fascinating example of how to creatively use new technology opportunities. With co-founder Peter Gabriel's continuing support, WITNESS distributes cameras and offers training in production, advocacy and the post-production process to its hundred-plus partners in dozens of countries. WITNESS partner videos have been used in international human rights tribunals and in presentations to U.N. human rights bodies, on such issues as disappearances in India and mass expulsions of Haitians from the Dominican Republic. They also have been used in advocacy, public education, TV broadcast and on the Web.

The group's Web site ([www.witness.org](http://www.witness.org)), where visitors can watch streamed video and connect to actions for human rights, gets more than half a million hits each month. Visitors who took action after they watched a vivid short video, *Forgotten People*, shot by WITNESS partner Mental Disability Rights International, helped change treatment of the mentally ill in Mexico. The WITNESS video, *Operation Fine Girl*—about rape as a war crime in Sierra Leone—is now being used to train police and lawyers there. And when Filipino peasants filmed the death of two of their members by landlord-paid thugs, the video was used to raise public concern that forced the government to investigate the crime.

These projects are as much about building community as they are about distributing information. They are part public service and part neighborhood center. They take advantage of the power of networking, and they create a zone from which visitors get trusted information.

### Reaching the audience

In adopting this strategy, they're not alone. The big challenge for all media these days is finding users—the problem that didn't exist for almost half a century for anyone working in network TV. Unlike the network TV model, new media projects have the ability to generate content but find it difficult to attract an audience.

All of us—especially those of us on the online side of the digital divide, but even the person with more radio stations than she can listen to—now have more media than we can possibly use, coming at us from more sources than ever before. And this requires users to do exhaustive checks to find out whether they want to trust the sending party. It's a spam universe out there now, and media consumers are all suffering from what David Shenk calls "data smog," a media environment polluted by untrustworthiness.

Filtering is the future. Not just the spam software filter, not just the filters that block access to porn, but filters like your personal video recorder (TIVO is one kind), which will select a TV menu for you based on earlier choices. Filters like video on demand free you from time-based TV, much less going to the video store. Filters like satellite radio liberate you from time-based radio. Filters like browser preferences allow users to treat the Internet like the buttons on their car radios. Filters like Google and Yahoo bring library-level research resources to users' computer screens.

This prospect worries professionals of every ideological stripe, in every time-based medium, from newspapers to radio to TV. Gurus and marketers are happy to call this media diet the "Daily Me," and they celebrate the new freedom of the consumer. But what worries the professionals should probably worry users, too.

When you have to relentlessly out-shout, out-brand and out-gimmick competitors for customer attention, when branding is a crucial shortcut to trust, advantages accrue even faster than before to those with the biggest promotional and advertising budgets (like Time Warner), those with the biggest existing reputations for quality (like the *New York Times*), and those with the most sensational products (like Fox). The middle ground between the biggest names and the welter of small ones is eroded.

Insiders also worry (and others should too!) that filters can be active little agenda-setters of their own. That's why the menu services for digital TV are hot commodities right now. Control them, and media makers control channel users' choices.

Big media are looking to control user choices in a digital-download era in other ways, too. The RIAA and MPAA calling all downloaders pirates is not just bad and stupid, it's an irritating rearguard action much less important than other corporate moves.

The Digital Millennium Copyright Act is a vile law that criminalizes any action that breaks an owner's anti-copying code. It goes along with industry development of digital locks in software and in hardware, so that all users in all circumstances are treated like paying customers. Such restrictions don't just preempt fair use, a legal right of copying in place for hundreds of years. They also shut down other user rights, such as loaning your kid a CD you love or showing an article to a friend.

### Fighting for bandwidth

The digital download era arrived with broadband Internet, the super-fast kind. The companies bringing broadband Internet to households have issues with user's freedom of use. Most services limit upload time and amount to reduce competition with their services.

The phone and cable companies also have been slow to get broadband to customers and to make it affordable. That's probably because they haven't figured out quite yet how to make it pay without threatening their businesses. Meanwhile, a cheap, unregulated way to extend networks on the Internet is growing rapidly at the grassroots: wi-fi (for "wireless fidelity"), or use of open, unlicensed spectrum to connect to the Internet.

Wi-fi, where users buy their own small, radio-like sender/receivers and connect via the same kind of spectrum that baby monitors work on, could become more than a way to download e-mail at Starbucks or, as it is today, a way for rural people to get broadband when the cable company won't string the wires.

As researchers at the New America Foundation have shown, wi-fi could become the basis for a low-cost, citizen-built, unregulated digital communications

network. For this to become possible, government will have to stop giving huge wads of spectrum to assigned users like the broadcasters and start taking advantage of digital-era options that free up spectrum for flexible uses. But guess what—the current holders of spectrum and the current broadband providers aren't wild about either of these options.

The media industry weather likely will stay stormy for a while, and that could be a good thing. Unpredictability can mean opportunity for smaller players. But the biggest players want it to calm down, and they intend to use their size and weight to influence it.

For progressive media makers, the environment creates both opportunities and agendas. Aggregating audience is a central challenge for every media outlet struggling

to survive, as their potential audiences are busy filtering them out. For progressives, aggregating audience comes down to building communities of values and action, people filtering each other into their networks of values (as OneWorld, political parties and MoveOn have done) and then connecting to other networks (of allies, politicians and opinion leaders) to make change. Then the "viral marketing" so typical of digital communication can quickly expand community.

Progressive media makers also share their media problems with many others. It's a great time to find allies to demand resources and policies that support public spaces such as public broadcasting, neighborhood communications networks and community media workshops. Those spaces aren't left-owned or even left-leaning, but because

they are public zones, progressives have a voice in them that they don't have in commercial media.

By themselves, progressive media makers are flyspeck stakeholders in a turbulent industry environment. As defenders of public media spaces and policies, they make with others the argument that media are tools of a democratic process, an open society and a vital culture.

These very actions can affect the weather prediction by putting public voices back into the processes that shape tomorrow's media. They also work as a shelter that keeps progressives huddling alone in the storm. ■

## PROFILE

# Prometheus Radio Project

**D**espite an early victory, the court battle between the Federal Communications Commission and media reform advocates, the staff of Prometheus Radio Project—which advocates for low-power FM broadcasters—remains only cautiously optimistic.

Even if Prometheus can galvanize public and congressional resistance to the FCC's June 2nd ruling on media ownership—a measure that's been denounced by both Democrats and Republicans—a rollback of the ruling is not guaranteed.

Prometheus spearheaded the legal opposition to the ruling, which would relax media ownership rules by permitting one company to reach 45 percent of the nation's television viewers and own broadcast outlets and newspapers in the same market. The stay on the regulations, granted September 3 by the 3rd U.S. Circuit

Court of Appeals, allows Prometheus an opportunity to prove deregulation would permit giant corporations like Fox and Viacom to increase their media holdings at the expense of localism and diversity.

Hannah Sassaman, program director of Prometheus, explains: "The stay keeps the issue current and dire, and keeps fire under the butts of media organizers to keep the American public fighting for diversity on the airwaves."

Prometheus is well suited to lead this battle, as the group promotes localism and diversity in its advocacy work for. "Radio is intrinsically democratic because it is cheap to build," says Sassaman. LPFM stations, which cost around \$10,000 to build, broadcast up to 100 watts. LPFM stations can fill the gaps in local programming that are inevitably created as national

media conglomerates gobble up more frequency.

Pete Tridish abandoned his pirate ways and founded Prometheus in 1997 after the FCC shut down his unlicensed station, Radio Mutiny. In 2000 the FCC started its low-power radio service and allowed some community groups to apply for licenses. Prometheus helped build several of these licensed stations by organizing radio barn-raising workshops, in which volunteers assemble a station from the ground to the antenna. The group held barn raisings in Maryland, California, Louisiana and Washington.

This December, Prometheus will help build a station for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida. Radio Concien-cia will air programs in several languages, including English, Spanish and Creole.

"The station will be used by

our members to talk to our members about the issues at the heart of our work—wages, labor relations and community issues outside the job," says Greg Asbed, a coalition staff member.

Sassaman contends that LPFM is integral to the future of media diversity. "Instead of thinking of analog radio as a dead technology, I encourage people to reclaim the band as corporations move toward digital technology." Prometheus intends to bring this message to a global audience by expanding the outreach they've done to countries like Nepal and Mexico.

"The ability to communicate freely," says Sassaman, "is one of the most powerful weapons that a person, a community, a region, a nation can have."

For more information go to: [www.prometheusradio.org](http://www.prometheusradio.org), or [www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org).

—Emily Udell



# Knowing What's Nice

BY KURT VONNEGUT

Author's note: I'm working on a novel, *If God Were Alive Today*, about a fictitious man, Gil Berman, 36 years my junior, who cracks jokes or whatever in front of college audiences from time to time, something I myself have done. Here are excerpts from some of what I myself said onstage at the University of Wisconsin in Madison on the evening of September 22, 2003, as we touch off the last chunks and drops and whiffs of fossil fuels.

K.V.

September 24, 2003  
Sagaponack, New York

**I**t must be kind of spooky to be a student or teacher in a university as great as this one, with its libraries and laboratories and lecture halls, while knowing it is within the borders of a nation where wisdom, reason, knowledge and truth no longer apply.

I realize that some of you may have come in hopes of hearing tips on how to become a professional writer. I say to you, "If you really want to hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be a homosexual, the least you can do is go into the arts. But do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites, standing for absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college."

But actually, to practice any art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow. So do it. Dance on your way out of here. Sing on your way out of here. Write a love poem when you get home. Draw a picture of your bed or roommate.

And hey, listen: A sappy woman sent me a letter a few years back. She knew I was

sappy, too, which is to say a lifelong northern Democrat in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt mode, a friend of the working stiff. She was about to have a baby, not mine, and wished to know if it was a bad thing to bring such a sweet and innocent creature into a world as bad as this one is. I replied that what made being alive almost worthwhile for me, besides music, was all the saints I met, who could be anywhere. By saints I meant people who behaved decently in a strikingly indecent society. Perhaps some of you are or will become saints for her child to meet.

**A**nd now I want to tell you about my late Uncle Alex. He was my father's kid brother, a childless graduate of Harvard who was an honest life insurance salesman in Indianapolis. He was well-read and wise. And his principal complaint about other human beings was that they so seldom noticed it when they were happy. So when we were drinking lemonade under an apple tree in

the summer, say, and talking lazily about this and that, almost buzzing like honeybees, Uncle Alex would suddenly interrupt the agreeable blather to exclaim, "If this isn't nice, I don't know what is."

So I do the same now, and so do my kids and grandkids. And I urge you to please notice when you are happy, and exclaim or murmur or think at some point, "If this isn't nice, I don't know what is."

That's one favor I've asked of you.

Now I've got another one, a show of hands. How many of you have had a teacher at any point in your entire education who made you happier to be alive, prouder to be alive than you had previously believed possible? Now please say the name of that teacher out loud to someone sitting or standing near you.

OK? All done? "If this isn't nice, I don't know what is."

**I**'ll be 81 on November 11. What's it like to be this old? I can't parallel park worth a damn anymore. Please don't watch when I try to do it. But no matter how bad things may get for me, the music will still be wonderful. My epitaph, should I ever need one, God forbid: "The only proof he ever needed of the existence of God was music."

You and the police are entitled to know, since I am going to spend the night near you, that I am both a Humanist and a Luddite. I may hold a Black Mass in the parking garage of the Best Western Hotel, if I can find a neo-conservative baby to sacrifice.

Do you know what a Humanist is? I am honorary president of the American Humanist Association, having succeeded the late, great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov in that functionless capacity. We Humanists try to behave well without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. We serve as best we can: the

only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community.

We had a memorial services for Isaac a few years back, and at one point I said, "Isaac is up in Heaven now." It was the funniest thing I could have said to a group of Humanists. I rolled them in the aisles. It was several minutes before order could be restored. And if I should ever die, God forbid, I hope you will say, "Kurt is up in Heaven now." That's my favorite joke.

Do you know what a Luddite is? That's a person who doesn't like newfangled contraptions. Contraptions like nuclear submarines armed with Poseidon missiles that have H-bombs in their warheads, and like computers that cheat you out of becoming. Bill Gates says, "Wait till you can see what your computer can become." But it's you who should be doing the becoming. What you can become is the miracle you were born to work—not the damn fool computer.

Now you know what a Humanist and a Luddite are. Do you know what a Twerp is? When I was in high school in Indianapolis 65 years ago, a Twerp was a guy who stuck a set of false teeth up his rear end and bit the buttons off the back seats of taxicabs. (And a Snarf was a guy who sniffed the seats of girls' bicycles.)

And I consider anybody a Twerp who hasn't read the greatest American short story, which is "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," by Ambrose Bierce. It isn't remotely political. It is a flawless example of American genius, like "Sophisticated Lady" by Duke Ellington or the Franklin stove. "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," by Ambrose Bierce.

I consider anybody a Twerp who hasn't read *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville. There can never be a better book than that one on the strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in our form of government.

Want a taste of that great book? He says, and he said it 168 years ago, that in no country other than ours has love of money taken stronger hold on the affections of men. OK?

And many of you, if not most, have surely at least dipped into that great book. But I can hardly call you Twerps, or even Snarfs, if you have never even heard of the next book I want to celebrate. Practically nobody has, since it is basically a medical

text: *The Mask of Sanity*, first published in 1941 and written by the late Dr. Hervey Cleckley, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Medical College of Georgia.

Some people are born deaf, some are born blind or whatever, and this book is about congenitally defective human beings of a sort who are making this whole country and many other parts of the planet go completely haywire nowadays. These are people born without consciences. They know full well the pain their actions may cause others to feel but do not care. They cannot care. They came into this world with a screw loose, and now they're taking charge of everything. They appear to be great leaders because they are so decisive. Do this! Do that! What makes them so decisive is that they do not care and cannot care what happens next.

Now then, there's a good news and there's a bad news tonight. The bad news is that the Martians have landed in New York City, and are staying at the Waldorf. The good news is that they only eat homeless man, women and children of all colors, and they pee gasoline.

But seriously, if you read the supermarket tabloids you know that for the past 10 years a team of Martian anthropologists has been studying our country, the only country worth a damn on the whole planet—forget Brazil and Argentina. Well, they went back home last week because they knew how really awful global warming is about to be. Their space ship wasn't a flying saucer. It was more of a flying soup tureen. And they're little, only six inches high, but they aren't green. They're mauve.

By way of farewell, their little mauve leader said there were two things about American culture no Martian could ever understand. "What is it," she said in that teeny-weeny, tanny-wanny, toney-woney little voice of hers, "what can it possibly be about blow jobs and golf?"

That is stuff from a novel I've been working on for the past five years, about a standup comedian at the end of the world. It is about making jokes while we are killing all the fish in the ocean, and touching off



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the last chunks or drops or whiffs of fossil fuel. But it will not let itself be finished.

Its working title—or actually non-working title—is *If God Were Alive Today*. And hey, listen: It is time we thanked God that we are in a country where even the poor people are overweight. But the Bush diet could change that.

And about the novel I can never finish, *If God Were Alive Today*: The hero, the standup comedian on Doomsday, not only denounces our addiction to fossil fuels, with the pushers in the White House. Because of overpopulation, he is also against sexual intercourse. His name is Gil Berman, and he says to audiences like this one, "I am a flaming neuter. I am as celibate as at least 50 percent of the heterosexual Roman Catholic clergy. Celibacy is not a root canal, and it is so cheap and convenient. Talk about safe sex! You don't have to do or say anything afterwards, because there is no afterwards."

Gil Berman goes on: "When my tantrum, which is what I call my TV set, waves boobs in my face, and tells me that

everybody but me is going to get laid tonight, and this is a national emergency, so I've got to rush out and buy pills or a car or a folding gymnasium I can hide under my bed, I laugh like a hyena. I know and you know there are millions upon millions of good Americans, present company not excepted, who aren't going to get laid tonight.

"And we neuter vote! And I look forward to a day when the President of the

United States, no less, who probably isn't going to get laid that night either, decrees a National Neuter Pride Day. And out of our closets we'll come. And we will go marching up main streets all over this great land of ours, shoulders squared, chins held high, and laughing like hyenas."

What about God, if He were alive today? Gil Berman says, "God would have to be an Athiest, because the excrement has hit the air-conditioning big time, big time." ■

## EVENTS

### Friday, December 5 Chicago

The University of Illinois Chicago's Great Cities Institute presents its 10th Anniversary Winter Forum on Friday, December 5, 2003 in Chicago. The Forum brings together policy experts, academics and community leaders to assess the state of the city at the local and national level and is organized around cross-cutting urban policy themes. Please join us for an engaging national conversation on state of urban America on the theme *Where We Stand: Cities, Challenge and Change*. To register and for more information, please visit the Forum website at [www.uic.edu/cuppa/gci/](http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/gci/).

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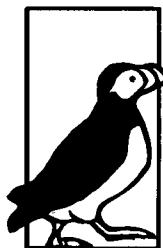
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